

PERFORMING EDUCATION:
THE UTOPIAN POTENTIAL OF CREATIVE PEER-TO-PEER
SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION FOR QUEER YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

In this cultural moment, young queers are struggling to imagine themselves and find community. A significant component of enabling a youth's self-discovery is providing access to inclusive and culturally-relevant education about their bodies, especially as it relates to sexual health. Current models of instruction are limited. Institutional learning environments may rely on materials that are overtly or subtly homophobic (for example, speaking only of heterosexual relationships outside of the small section or chapter on other forms of sexual orientation). If a youth is lucky enough to encounter materials that strive to be more inclusive, the communication method may be dry and purely factual, leaving the youth to attempt to translate useful information into their daily life. This project addresses the gap in sexual health education for queer youth. I argue for the potential of using *disidentificatory* performance as a medium through which to build a self-sufficient commons for young queer people. In order to first identify the markers of this method of communication, I draw upon the work of Jose Esteban Munoz, a queer theorist and performance studies scholar. I conducted a critical content analysis of the fifth episode of the online video series called *Heavy Petting* and considered whether or not it could be considered an example of disidentificatory performance used for sexual health education. In my analysis of *Heavy Petting*, four themes arose, each of which related to things that are needed in order for a young queer commons to be self-sufficient: (1) tools for queering toxic tropes; (2) communication methods that allow for dissensus; (3) stylish politics grounded in a subversive aesthetic; and (4) role models and educators who will help create an intimate *queerworld*, in the words of Munoz. The results of my findings indicate that the *Heavy Petting* video is an example of disidentificatory performance, in that it satisfies the three criteria that I name as constitutive of the genre. This suggests that such peer-to-peer educational projects do indeed hold the potential to support commons building among young queer people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DEDICATION

I acknowledge that I completed this thesis while living and working on Six Nations of the Grand River territory. I am inspired by the Indigenous freedom fighters who enact resistance daily.

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Dr. Loys Ligate, who taught me how to be a feminist in difference. Thank you for giving me everything.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It is a hot and humid spring night in Kitchener, a town forever in between: bound to its failed factory boom and struggling against the gentrifying forces of its closest neighbour, Waterloo. I have just returned home, wobbly from a night of dancing at the only gay bar in town. The silver glitter that was so perfectly placed on my cheekbones hours ago is now plastered down my neck, stuck there with sweat. Sitting in my livingroom, I enjoy a much deserved moment of silence. Habitually, I open my laptop and perch it on my legs, sore from my laughable attempt as a white girl of whacking¹ to that last Prince track. Physically static, I metaphorically dive into the silk-lined rabbit hole that is the world of online Queerdom. I find myself deep in the recesses of the world of kink-positive blogs, spaces where people can seek advice about how to enter into or maintain healthy relationships along the spectrum of BDSM². I read about one young trans woman's experiences with using nipple clamps for the first time. I am lost in the detailed instructional I find for how to construct a DIY flogger from upcycled bike tubes. I envy the confidence with which one blogger, without apology, asserts their desire for being submissive during sex. I am just about to commit to shutting down my computer and trying to get to sleep before the sun begins to rise, when I come across the video work of Jessica Luxery and Majestic Legay. Jessica Luxery is “a high-femme fatty who bleeds glitter and kittens in lace bonnets” (n.d.). Majestic Legay “combine[s] their activism and art with theory and glitter in ways that are aesthetically bad ass and

¹ Whacking is a flamboyant style of dance that developed in the 1970's in the underground gay club scene, primarily in the United States. It is rooted in modern jazz, funk, and soul and is marked by its incorporation of certain techniques from the predominantly Black drag ball culture, such as voguing and locking.

² BDSM includes “[a]ctivities in which one person controls the behaviour of another, and/or puts them in bondage, and/or gives them intense sensations.” It is an acronym derived from “B/D for bondage and discipline, D/S for dominance and submission, and S/M (or SM or S&M) for sadomasochism” (Easton and Hardy, 2009, p. 272).

probably revolutionary” (n.d.). They are both online personalities who utilize performance and video to create dialogue on the internet about consent, body image, and imaginative ways of resisting various forms of policing (e.g. Strangers shooting glares at fat bodies, doctors refusing to provide adequate care to trans bodies, etc.). I have followed Majestic's work as an online persona since they began contributing to the theoretically-charged and practically dedicated blog, *Glitter Politic*³. We met while I was an undergraduate student at the University of Victoria. I note in this video how different Majestic looks. I have done this double-take many times before: for example, when a friend dropped their *high-femme* (ultra-feminine) performance and re-modelled themselves after Leslie Feinberg, author of the queer canonic novel, *Stone Butch Blues*. Over my few years I have had the pleasure of watching fellow young queers morph into more complicated iterations of themselves. They have helped me to learn new ways of being a witness to change.

There is something different, something electric and compelling about this video. It is described as the first in a new series being started by Majestic (a monicker combining the first names of the artists.) At the start of the video, Jessica states that they are pleased to announce the beginning of their “new bi-weekly sex education and advice vlog” called *Heavy Petting*. As a young urban queer and a community educator and artist, I am excited by the sounds of this project. The artists' statement of purpose featured on the project's website states that it “is a mating call, a rallying-cry, a way of life.” The basic structure of the show very closely mirrors that of help or advice television, such as *Dr. Phil* or *Oprah*. On the *Heavy Petting (HP)* website there is a section where you can submit a question either personally or anonymously or you can email them a question directly. During each episode, Luxery and Legay take turns reading out inquiries they

³ <http://glitterpolitic.tumblr.com/>

have received and then share their thoughts. Their sets change every episode but the essential location remains the same: they are always sitting in a bed with the covers drawn up over their legs so that only their torsos are visible (see figure 1.1). They cleverly answer questions from the very type of location where the queries arise. The other similarity among their sets is the kitch and art that remain visible either in the background or foreground of the frame, such as framed images of cats or figurines of badgers adorned with pink bows. When they post their videos to the *HP* website, they always include links or references to supplementary resources.



Figure 1.1. A screenshot from the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting*. As in every video, Luxery and Legay are sitting in bed with covers drawn over themselves.

In large part, my excitement over the *Heavy Petting* series is due to the turn that it represents in queer communities. That is, queers are coming to realize that assimilation does not work because it requires us to make too many compromises. It requires queers to do away with those parts of ourselves that had us outcast in the first place. When we try to assimilate, when we try to more closely resemble the white, middle-class, heterosexual norm, we become quiet, polite, and fragile. We lose ourselves and each other. This coming to consciousness has historically occurred in cycles: this is not the first time that the movement for queer liberation has fragmented into privileged queers

who try to gently challenge the system and necessarily more militant queers who understand that the system is inherently beyond repair. In the words of Assata Shakur, who currently lives in political exile in Cuba after narrowly surviving the racist scapegoating of the New Jersey Police force: "nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them" (Shakur, p. 139). In other words, in order to demand freedom, marginalized communities need to be able to gain self-sufficiency apart from the state.

LOCATING THE PURPOSE OF THIS THESIS

With these communities in mind, the purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of using disidentificatory performance as a medium through which to build a self-sufficient commons for young queer people. In order to discover the potential value of disidentificatory performance, I conduct a critical content analysis of the fifth episode of the online video series called *Heavy Petting* (described above). In creating this paper and envisioning its purpose, I am indebted to the freedom fighters, gender warriors, and academic Amazons who have come before me. Specifically, I want to pay homage to those queers who have lost battles with academia. I am thinking of people like Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old student at Rutgers University who committed suicide on September 22, 2012 after being outed by his roommate (Goodman, 2012). Or Rachel Tudor, Assistant Professor of English at Southeastern Oklahoma State University who was recently denied tenure and terminated because she is a transgender woman whose 'lifestyle choices' did not sit well with the Vice President of Academic Affairs, Doug McMillan (Sehgal, 2011). Or the countless trans* people who have been objectified and whose lived experiences have been appropriated by academics and researchers (Namaste, 2000; Prosser, 1998; Serano, 2007). This project would have no purpose if it were not for

the tireless efforts of queer activists who are fuelled by the memories of those who have been lost to hateful hands or swallowed whole by our institutions. To take up this call to action, I ask the following research questions:

1. What specifically marks a *disidentificatory* performance?
2. What are the roles of the aesthetic in a performative queer politic?
3. What is the potential value of using disidentificatory performance as a tool for community building among young queers?

Social Relevance

This paper is located in a social environment where young queers are struggling to find community. We are thwarted from birth, it seems; forever battling to spot fellow freaks in the whiteout blizzards of breeders⁴. I have intentionally chosen to engage with a piece of media in my analysis that is accessible online, rather than a live performance, for example, in an effort to make this paper relevant to urban, suburban, and rural queers. This project is aimed at identifying the ways that disidentificatory performance may act as a tool for building a particular type of community: one that is self-sufficient and can teach itself. bell hooks, a key feminist thinker and black educator who grew up in the segregated South, has discussed in depth the limitations and distinct failures of institutionalized education in the West. In her text *Teaching to Transgress* she reflects on her experiences watching professors who “used the classroom to enact rituals of control

⁴ A 'breeder' is a humorous and somewhat scathing term of retaliation used to describe heterosexuals. I employ it here as a hat tip to the power of insider-type humour. Readers who instantly knew the term will hopefully relate to the blissful feeling of being able to read a piece and feel as though the writer occupies a similarly troubled social location as your own. I am cognizant of the fact that this term may be jarring to some. I have chosen to keep it here not in spite of but precisely *because* it is acidic: its use invites us to consider what would press an entire marginalized population to adopt methods of retaliation.

that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power” (1994, p. 5). Within this reality, being able to create and process knowledge outside of state sanctioned outlets (e.g. Schools, government-funded agencies) can be a key step in the liberation of a marginalized population. When people of privilege (e.g. straight people, whites) try to teach members of an oppressed group (e.g. queers, people of colour), the result is often disastrous or hilarious, depending on your sense of humour (Freire, 1970). Joking aside, public education is a serious venture because in the West it is the vehicle through which young people learn “the patterns of interpretation and practices of cultural production” (marino, 1997, p. 104). Current models of instruction about sexual health for queer youth are limited. Cris Mayo (2007), a prominent researcher on educational policy, explains that “schools [in North America] have been organizationally structured to keep out gender and sexual dissenters” and the result is that much of the information given to queer youth, including that on sexual health, echoes the call from the majoritarian public sphere to “conform to the norm” (p. 82). Institutional learning environments may rely on materials that are overtly or subtly homophobic (for example, speaking only of heterosexual relationships outside of the small section or chapter on other forms of sexual orientation). If a youth is lucky enough to encounter materials that strive to be more inclusive, the communication method may be dry and purely factual, leaving the youth to attempt to translate useful information into their daily life. This project addresses this gap in sexual health education for queer youth. This project is important because it recognizes that there is a void in the knowledge about sexual health to which young queers are given access. Furthermore, this project acknowledges this gap cannot be filled from within the system.

Finally, this project contributes to the proverbial toolbox that young queers access in order to create their identities. I hope that as I chart the potential value in

disidentificatory performance, it will be clear that it can be a tool that can empower youth to self-identify in ways that do not require the absolutes of identification or counteridentification. Adolescence and young adulthood is a difficult time for anyone but it can be an especially difficult time for youth who are either deciding or have committed to living outside of dominant definitions of sexuality and/or gender, as evidenced by the high rates of suicide among LGBTQ⁵ youth (D'Augelli et al., 2006). We need role models just as much as we need teachers and elders. The theorists and artists whose work I draw upon most heavily in this paper were chosen because they are able to hold both positions simultaneously. They are educators, whether as academics or artists, and they are also models, who display *diverse* ways of inhabiting queerness.

A NOTE ON REFLEXIVITY

I am dedicated to engaging in a type of queerness both as an individual and as an academic that is complicated, messy, and resistant to assimilation. During the process of conceptualizing this project and while writing, I have committed myself to regularly making the time to pause, reflect, and consider how my personal location is affecting my direction. I am a white, temporarily able-bodied, neurotypical, and was adopted as a child into the upper class. I have full citizenship in Canada and have had supportive familial networks throughout my life. These privileges impact my perspective and influence my academic work. My approach in this project has been to complete my reflections in private and shift my approach accordingly, though I do not often blatantly include personal implications in my writing. I do, however, include personal anecdotes in the introductions to my chapters, as part of an attempt to make myself visible and offer a

⁵ LGBTQ is an acronym standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, and queer/questioning. This acronym may be used in various combinations (e.g. LBG, LGBT, etc.).

reminder that the following conclusions were reached by someone with a particular social location. My hope is that these anecdotes will also make this thesis more enjoyable and remind readers, especially those who are not entirely beholden to academia, that I am anything but an infallible scholar. Under headings, I sometimes include excerpts from queer cultural artefacts (e.g. Popular TV shows, films, and other media). This is to further my attempt to make this thesis more accessible to a non-strictly academic audience and to make clear that I am a participant in the culture and community of which I speak. There are far too many studies, papers, articles, and books written by prying heterosexuals about queers, in which we are interesting subjects or even *objects* of study. I have found it empowering to be able to write about the same location from which I stand.

While writing, I have found the support of friends and allies incredibly helpful. When coming to certain conclusions, I often sought out friends with solid political frameworks to talk with. I have tried to be aware of which academics and artists I cite in this paper, with a particular eye to diversity. Continually citing the same white settlers, even though their work may be considered by some to be useful and radical, is antithetical to this project and to the type of queerness that I strive to practice in every aspect of my life.

I was drawn to this project and to selecting *Heavy Petting* in particular as my main source material because I selfishly wanted to carve out a set amount of space and time in which I could answer questions that had arisen in both my academic and activist practice. What would a sex-positive and queer sexual health education look like? Is there a way to deliver that education in a way that also models *how* to have conversations about sex? Does that education have to be limited to information about STIs? How do we balance teaching 'the facts' with more complex conversations about consent, body image, and kink? These questions can be overwhelming because they do not have clean answers

and the stakes are high: I know first hand some of the negative repercussions of inadequate sexual health education on the life of a young person, especially when that youth is questioning or queer.

In what follows, I outline the theoretical perspectives that directly influence how I have constructed the methods I use to analyze the episode from *Heavy Petting*. These methods are outlined in my third chapter, in which I also discuss the role my community has played in informing my viewing of my chosen material. I present my analysis in my fourth chapter and present the themes that I believe to be central to a disidentificatory performance, particularly one that is created with the goal of strengthening the self-sufficiency of a community. I return to the social relevance of performative education in my fifth chapter and consider what my findings suggest about the potential for performance as a critical and multi-faceted tool. I conclude this paper with a few unanswered questions, a reflection on my processes of research and writing, and considerations for future study.

CHAPTER TWO

Building A Stage: Theoretical Groundwork

During my third year of study as an undergraduate student, I was enrolled in a seminar on feminist theories through the Women's Studies program at the University of Waterloo. I am an unabashed nerd with a particular passion for postmodern feminist theory so you can imagine that I was looking forward to four months of exploration. My excitement was extinguished for various reasons, including an astounding lack of enthusiasm from other students. (Granted, not everyone is riveted by theory but I expected to feel at least a *pulse* in the classroom). Beyond the predictable let-downs, there was one moment that deftly explains why I did not particularly *enjoy* the class. (The italics, for those not versed in facebook-era shorthand, denotes restraint on my part.) For my final paper, I chose to draw parallels between the processes of nation formation and the ways in which identity presentation is policed within queer communities. I chose to ground my paper in queer theory and clearly cited the participation of feminist theorists in the historical and continuing development of the field. The most substantial comment on my paper pertained to my foundational choice: the professor questioned why I was using queer theory in a class about *feminist* theories, as if the two were absolutely disparate. She did not question whether I had properly explained my choice or how it connected to my argument. I could have worked with such constructive criticism. Rather, she questioned whether queer theory even had a *place* in a Women's Studies classroom. I was not upset. I was livid and resolved to, whenever possible, focus my future academic work on queer theory. I have since discovered another world, tucked away in the glittery recesses of the Ivory Tower, in which my subjectivity is valuable, rather than a hinderance or anecdote in the spirit of 'inclusion.' In this magical realm, I can hear the

singing of *choruses* of faggots, drama queens, and lavender menaces⁶.

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical foundations that help to support the relevance of this project and aided me in constructing the methods I used to analyze the video material I engage with at the heart of this thesis. I begin with a basic outline of queer theory, as it is the academic field in which this thesis is located. I discuss some of the central terms to this paper, including *commons* and *performance*. I then describe the four pillars of the specific vein of what I call a *performative* queer theory, one that insists on centralizing actors in various senses of the role. By drawing on a chorus of theorists, I explain how the lines blurred between private and public spheres, for example, expose the heterosexist and colonial motives that drive the maintenance of such boundaries. The academics who I draw upon in this chapter work from within the very systems that they seek to challenge. They pointedly question and defy the rigidity of capitalist knowledge production. By doing so, they engage in a praxis of queer theory through finding creative and risky ways of destabilizing the Master's house with his own tools.⁷ Most importantly, these theorists are able to act both as teachers and elders: they are dedicated to education and theory *because* they understand that they are the parents, the grandparents, of struggling queer youth.

I frame the four central elements of a performative queer theory in terms of a series of *slippages* that trouble sets of [constructed] dichotomies: (1) personal and public spheres; (2) subject and viewer (or actor and audience); (3) low and high theory; and (4)

⁶ I highly value the practice of reclaiming language that has in the past been or is currently used violently against sexual 'deviants.' Of particular interest in this context, is Betty Freidan, the leader of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in the US at the beginning of what is now known as the Second Wave, who dubbed lesbians as the "lavender menace." The term gained popularity and was used widely to describe lesbians, who were considered by some to be a scourge to the cause of women's liberation.

⁷ Here I am referencing Audre Lorde's groundbreaking essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in which she passionately called out white feminists as responsible for challenging the racism present in the movement. I recognize that my use of this reference is somewhat out of step with the original intention of Lorde's essay. I take this risk in the hopes that this is read as signalling a need for a diversity of tactics that include re-appropriating the Master's tools to emancipatory ends.

failure and success. The reasoning behind structuring this chapter in such a way is two-fold. Firstly, by outlining a set of four elements I hope to resist the urge, ingrained in me through years of book-based training, to offer any orderly definition of a supposed singular “Queer Theory.” I hope to make it clear that there is no authoritarian definition that could bind a field that not only values but *relies* on complexity, contradiction, multiplicity, and diasporic subjectivities. This field necessitates fissures: cracks let light shine through and create opportunities for risk-taking and exploration. Secondly, I have chosen to build this chapter through a set of four slippages in order to mirror a Foucauldian understanding of power that is central to this paper. In other words, I do not want to reify dichotomies by stating that power can be explained with a visual analogy of a two-faced coin (i.e. One either is in control or being controlled, the oppressed versus the monolithic oppressor). In the first volume of Foucault's seminal text, *The History of Sexuality*, he explained his view of discourse as created through a “complex and unstable process” as “both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hinderance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (1990, p. 101). Dichotomies that define who or what is accepted or excluded are mere constructions and do not reflect the way that power actually operates. In fact, dominance is achieved and resistance is enacted through the tactical use of what Foucault terms “discursive elements” that can serve multiple purposes. Focusing on the slippages present in sacrosanct values shifts our attention away from simplistic renderings of social hierarchies and toward the liminal zones in which maintained order gives way to generative chaos. This shift is necessary to this project because if I am to undertake an analysis of the video I have chosen from the series *Heavy Petting* that is useful and instructive, I must resist simplistic understandings of power. For example, if I view the characters as inherently subversive because they enact queer desire for each other, I

might be overlooking the ways in which that desire or their aesthetic reify normative sexual practices or privileges able bodies.

Finally, I explain the tool of disidentificatory performance and how it can be used to further the aims of queer theory. In order to do so, I discuss José Esteban Muñoz's text, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). I name the three elements he outlines as constitutive of the type of performance against which I analyzed *Heavy Petting*: (1) the complexity of power; (2) desire and identification; and (3) the creation of *queerworlds*. I return to these three elements in-depth in my fourth chapter to determine whether or not the episode from *Heavy Petting* is an example of disidentificatory performance. Muñoz's entrance has been preceded by ample exposition: the exploration of a performative queer theory in my previous chapter and the three-pronged discussion of postmodernist visual culture.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

A Primer: Queer Theory 101

Lara Perkins: You have to start at least taking some steps towards being out.
Dana: I will.
Lara Perkins: Because you're going to be miserable being in the closet.
Dana: I know.
Lara Perkins: And you are really, really gay.
Dana: I know. *[almost laughing]*
Lara Perkins: And it's one of the things I like so much about you. If you hide that, you're hiding the best part. *[they kiss]*

(The L Word, 2004)

For the sake of clarity, before I launch into my discussion of a *performative* queer theory I will first offer a very basic picture of this field for the reader who has not previously been exposed to it. Annamarie Jagose's foundational text, *An Introduction to*

Queer Theory (1996), is cited as being the first to assign a name to a field that had already gathered a substantial amount of scholarship. Queer theory is the lovechild of Women's studies and queer studies, which had separately gained a significant foothold in the academy by the mid 1980's through the efforts of trailblazers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Lauren Berlant. Subsequently, the main tenets of queer theory are:

- (1) gender is socially constructed and maintained through personal regulation, interpersonal policing, and institutional structure (e.g. laws);
- (2) the spectrum of sexual orientation available to a subject is bound by the terms of their cultural environment (e.g. claiming oneself as a “lesbian” is only possible if and when that orientation can be socially imagined);
- (3) and systems of oppression that relate to gender and sexuality operate interdependently with those built on class, race, etc. and these systems are calculated and *logical*, in that they satisfy the maintenance of established hierarchies (in other words, homophobia is not simply about an individual happening to hate another).

This final tenet is what separates Queer Theory from queer studies. The former is a post-structuralist *critical* theory that cannot accept assimilationist projects, some of which are often classified as 'queer studies.' For example, a study advocating for the superficial inclusion of LGBT youth in after school programs could be considered part of queer studies. Queer Theory resists the language of inclusion because that very word implies that the existing system belongs to straight people, who out of pity or empathy, however well-meaning, are taking it upon themselves to bring queer people into the fold.

In the first few pages of Jagose's text, she cites David Halperin's claim that “the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer 'queer theory'

can plausibly claim to be.” I would like to think that centring, rather than integrating, personal experience as a valuable and valid knowledge source is what helps to maintain the practice and content of queer theory as non-normative. By this I mean to suggest that there is some electrical quality to queer theory that perhaps separates it from other sects of cultural study, that “queerness is invested with a kind of inherent strategy of resistance in itself” (Gillespie, 2012, p. 4). Jagose claims that “[b]y refusing to crystallize in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of *resistance* to whatever constitutes normal. ...Queer Theory emphasizes this aspect of queer, and the analytical pressure it brings to bear” (pp. 99-100) on points of logical slippage, those junctures where identities collide within the limited/limitless space of an individual.

TERMINOLOGY

The Queer Commons

Throughout this paper, I will be arguing for the potential value of disidentificatory performance as a medium through which to build a self-sufficient commons for young queer people. My use of the term commons is congruent with the work of Antonio Negri and is grounded in a Foucauldian reality of biopolitical life. Negri, a well-known contributor to the arena of political philosophy, recently co-edited an anthology titled *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (2008) with Casare Casarino, a professor in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Their text outlines the trajectory of Negri's development as a philosopher and specifically details his major concepts, including that of the “commons.” A thread among Negri's writings contained in this anthology is an understanding of the term as a referent to networks that not only encompass what we think but directly shape *how* we are able to think. One such network that is very popular among young queers is “tumblr”, which is

an online microblogging platform. Unlike traditional blogs or online journals, sites like tumblr allow a user to set up an individualized site that is designed to showcase small posts and images, rather than substantial pieces of writing (hence the 'micro' prefix).

In order to illustrate what I mean when I say a young queer commons, I will discuss tumblr as a commons and draw upon the online personas of the artists who create the video series that I analyze in this paper. It is important to understand how these two youth have utilized the internet to express themselves, articulate their politics, find community, and ultimately find each other. Jessica Luxery and Majestic Legay⁸ gained significant popularity as individuals on tumblr before they met and joined to create *Heavy Petting*. On her tumblr profile, Luxery states: “I’m a high-femme fatty who bleeds glitter and kittens in lace bonnets. I was born on a bed of frosting, with a can of hairspray and a jug of blush, to a young (but legal!) Elizabeth Taylor and your Lord and Savior: Freddie Mercury.” Her wit and humour flavour all of her posts. The soft rose wallpaper (textured background) on her site is reflective of her aesthetic, repurposed from the 1990's. (I am certain that I am not the only one of Luxery's followers for whom this style reminds me of my childhood.) As someone whose development temporally paralleled that of the internet, Luxery and other queers of her generation are using microblogging sites to blend together their politic with repurposed images and icons. This work of mixing together one's childhood desires (e.g. for rose-coloured blush, kittens, and My Little Pony™) and current politics is part of the important process of disidentification, as articulated by José Esteban Muñoz. Humour as a tool is central to this process. For example, in the image below (figure 2.1), we see a picture of Luxery distorting her face in a way similar to how many of us did as children. She 'tags' the picture as “body

⁸ These two artist-educators clearly indicate on their respective tumblr pages that Luxery prefers female pronouns, such as she and her, while Legay prefers gender neutral pronouns, such as they and them. I respect these preferences throughout this chapter.

acceptance,” thus taking what could have been a purely gratuitous photo and reframing it so that she is modelling how one can repurpose the customs of childhood to embody one's politics.

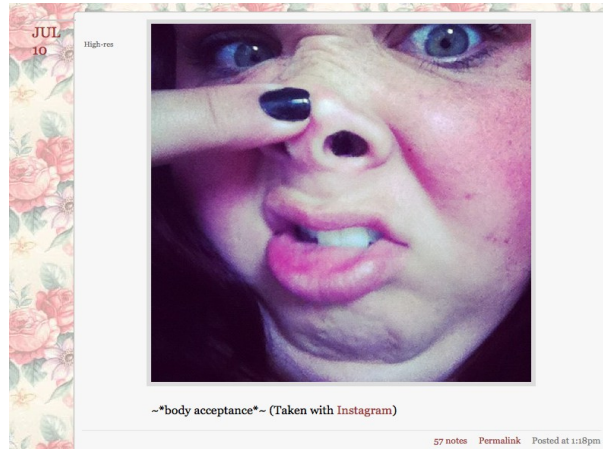


Figure 2.1. An image of Jessica Luxery from her tumblr page.

Majestic Legay's tumblr is very similar to Luxery's in that they both practice repurposing and disidentification. On their tumblr profile Majestic states: “I embody my art and politics through a combination of performative education and high glitz aesthetics aimed at creating public incitement and bizarre spectacle in both digital and physical realms.” Legay's online persona is different from Luxery's in some important ways. Whereas Luxery is a self-proclaimed *high femme* (typically meaning a lesbian or queer woman whose gendered performance is markedly feminine), Legay is inclined to what could be called a more 'butch-y' or masculine presentation. A common thread on their tumblr relates to embodiments of queered masculinity. For example, Legay recently posted a series of vanity shots and in the comment section questioned how to appropriate slick leather jackets and moustaches while wearing excessive amounts of eyeliner and blush (see figure 2.2).

The young queer commons of which I speak is intertextual. Negri (2008) argues

that communication networks shape not only what but how we think. In the young queer commons, the online and intertextual nature of communication through sites, such as tumblr, train the subject to interact with media and pseudo-celebrities with a critical eye. For example, attention is paid to whether or not the media maker is staying true to their previous work. Artists are not only considered but *placed* in relation to one another, due to the online capability to link sites, posts, and entries to each other and create labels or “hashtags” that denote trends. This is an important element to incorporate in our viewing of *Heavy Petting*, since many of its viewers would know about Majestic's previous work. In addition to their tumblr site, Majestic is known in queer youth online circles for their work on the blog *Glitter Politic* and was active with that site before they met Luxery. This blog is described simply as “self-love blown open.” Most of the posts on the site pertained to acceptance of fat bodies, beauty myths, and the queering of gender. Maintained by Legay and their friend, Ashley Aaron, the site has been an active voice in certain online communities of queer youth for over a year, which is relatively a long time. The nature of such online networks is that they are constantly shifting and changing, just as the majority of youth who create these sites are rapidly altering their identities and finding new ways to connect to others. As a tumblr user and follower, I have witnessed a trend among some of the most popular and longer-lasting queer 'tumbleogs': their creators and/or contributors have real relationships both online and offline. Indeed, Aaron and Legay's relationship heavily influence the content and tone of the blog. Many of their posts mention their strong friendship and the meaningful roles they play in each other's lives.

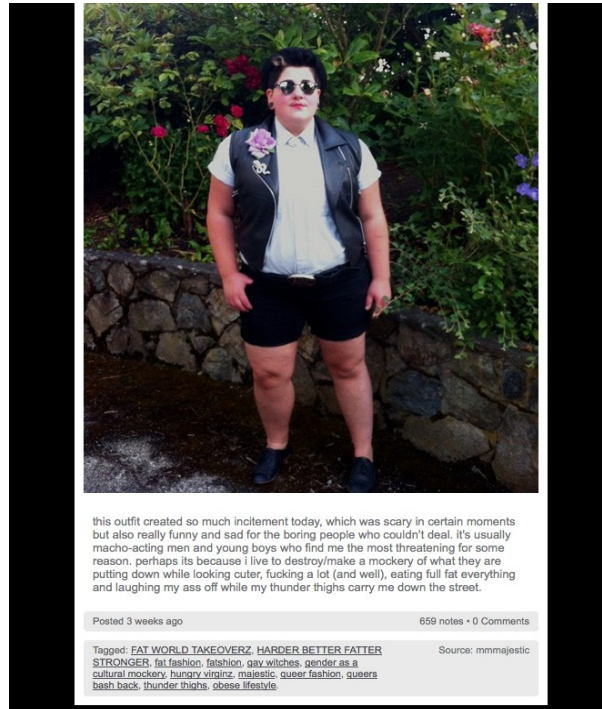


Figure 2.2. An image of Majestica Legay from the artist's tumblr page.

Tumblr's centrality among young queers is also due to its structure, which allows for dissensus, for generative disagreement. For example, tumblr allows users to “reblog” items from other profiles and add their own comments in which they can praise, dissect, reframe, or mock the item. The value of young queers using tumblr is in part to expand their *capacity* to think and their ability to imagine what queerness can look like, especially in relationship to others. More importantly, this imagining creates iterations of queerness that are not static nor monolithic but are ever-shifting and constantly [being] troubled. In a recent lecture given at York University in July of 2012, José Muñoz discussed the themes in his forthcoming book, *The Affective Commons: Toward a Brown Sensorium*. He emphasized that the commons, especially one formed around minoritarian politics or identities, is not a space for consensus. For Muñoz, being a member of a

minoritarian commons means feeling differently (versus feeling different): “[it] means being attuned to different economic, historical, and cultural narratives” and “participat[ing] in different modes of comportment.” Though the eventual goal is to deconstruct structures that require individuality, Muñoz argues that we, members of “under” commons, must work within difference. This reality necessitates a type of Lyotardian dissensus: generative disagreements that lead to creative thinking and flows of ideas. It creates room for intersectional identities: not all queers, for example, are going to be drawn to the same aesthetic as is present in Luxery's tumblr because her repurposing is of imagery that is particular to a certain era, geographical area, and class strata.

The commons that is central to this paper must be understood as a space for performance. To continue my exploration of tumblr, it can be understood as a stage. As a theatre practitioner and performance artist, I understand performance as a type of laboratory in which we experiment with pulling together parts of identity that are contradictory: it is where we 'work stuff out.' As a site that enables users to mash together and reblog images from sites, irrespective of political borders and continents, tumblr is also a sort of laboratory. Its structure allows for disidentification both in terms of a commons marked by dissensus and as a site of performance.

“All the World's A Drag”: Performance, Performativity, and Performative

- Will:* What are you talking about? You're not a performer.
Jack: I am now. Me, a piano and a spotlight. I'm calling it "Just Jack." Here's my flyer. "Just Jack." One night only. "Just Jack."
Will: Why one night? Oh, it's open mic night.
Jack: Bring Grace...or a date. Ha ha, I'm just kidding.
Will: [reads flyer] "A roller-coaster ride of emotions." Who said that?
Jack: A critic... OK, my shrink.

(*Will And Grace*, 1998)

I will now briefly discuss my usage of the terms performance, performativity, and performative. My use of the term “performative” as a prefix to queer theory superficially signals an appreciation for academic creativity and innovation. This is in line with performance studies scholar Craig Gingrich-Philbrook's (2000) notion of a performed theory, where theatre and theory are placed into a dependent and mutually fulfilling relationship. More importantly, I mean to suggest that theory must be created with action in mind (Freire, 1970). An inaccessible theory, created in an academic vacuum, is of no use to people on the streets. We need scholars who are willing to spend their time and energies developing new ideas and new ways of thinking that will be useful in creating spaces where we can find safety, love, and wholeness. We need queer and allied scholars who can find ways of helping young queers to assemble self-sufficient commons, who will work for the seventh generation.⁹

Performance, in the context of this paper, is a broad and varied thing: it “is always a doing and a thing done” (Diamond, 1996, p. 1). It superficially operates as a descriptor to classify the type of media that I analyze but it also functions as a lens through which to

⁹ The 'seventh generation' is what grounds the worldview of many indigenous nations. Oren Lyons, Chief of the Onondaga Nation, writes: “We are looking ahead... to make sure and to make every decision that we make relate to the welfare and well-being of the seventh generation to come” (Erikson, Vecsey, & Venables, 1980, p. 173).

understand human relations (Dobson & Neelands, 2000). The performance lens that I employ throughout this paper has context and meaning because of the achievements of my feminist elders. Shifting from a biologically essentialist to a more nuanced view of gendered relations and embodiments was one of the hallmarks of Second Wave feminism, which directly shaped the development of the field of queer theory (Voss, 2000). Organizers and theorists of the Second Wave fought to have their personal lives recognized as worthy material for both academic study and political action (e.g. laws to condemn intimate partner violence (Timmins, 1995)). Turner (2000), whose work often focuses on U.S. law and public policy, acknowledges that “the three persons who set much of the intellectual agenda for queer theory were women, two of them lesbians” (p. 107): Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick. (Unfortunately, it is beyond the limits of this thesis to discuss the work of these three women, especially in light of their wide and varied accomplishments.) In his text, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, Turner outlines Butler's suggested course of action by first detailing the role she played in “address[ing] the debate that raged among feminist theorists over the ostensible necessity of a precultural ground for identity” (p. 109). Butler's theory of gender as a performance, as something that is *performative*, as articulated in her text, *Gender Trouble* (1999), is undoubtedly one of the building blocks of what we now know of as queer theory. Turner summarizes Butler's argument that “[e]ffective attacks on gender hierarchies would stem... not from organizing around a foundation of anatomical sex, but from proliferating into incoherence the meanings of gender by repeating the cultures existing signs of gender in subversive ways” (p. 110). Turner notes that within Butler's logic, the subject's communication through gendered symbology necessitates one or more viewers to witness the performance. Therefore, on Butler's theoretical stage, playing with performances of gender, capitalizing on the *performativity* of it, would seem to be central to a gender

revolution. I explore this relationship between the gendered subject and the witness(es) in my discussion of the second and third elements of performative queer theory.

A PERFORMATIVE QUEER THEORY

Making the Case: The Problematics of Identity Politics

Before I begin to outline the four elements of a *performative* queer theory, I wish to first explain the need for such a particular vein. In so doing, I want to briefly introduce a particular theoretical text: *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, by José Esteban Muñoz (1999). It is the central text in my next chapter in which I outline the method I follow in order to analyze the video from the online series *Heavy Petting*. I wish to make a brief note here as to why I have chosen *Disidentifications* as a central text to this project. Simply put, this text exemplifies the four elements of a performative queer theory that I will be outlining shortly. Muñoz argues for the creation of alternative worlds through performances that document the experiences and resistance strategies employed by queer people of colour. Most importantly in the context of this paper, Muñoz focuses mainly on performances that address desire and longing. He frames minoritarian sexuality as risky and often contradictory and he specifically identifies the ways in which performers make sense of themselves through their subversive desires. In chapter four, I draw key parallels between the performers he cites in *Disidentifications* and the actions of the characters in the *Heavy Petting* episode is at the heart of this paper. Finally, Muñoz's text directly addresses the problematic elements of earlier iterations of queer theory and politics. In so doing, he pays meaningful homage to those feminists of colour who worked tirelessly to call out the racism, classism, and oppressions present in Second Wave feminist and LGBT movements.

In her influential essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical

Potential of Queer Politics?”, Cathy Cohen identified what she saw as some of the gaps in queer politics around the time of the paper's publication in a 1997 issue of the popular journal *GLQ: A Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Due to the fact that she was writing toward the end of the period known as the Second Wave, Cohen is able to crystallize the main points of decades of scholarship, citing the work of women such as Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks. She set out to question the seeming “inability of queer politics to effectively challenge heteronormativity... [as it] has often been built around a simple dichotomy between those deemed queer and those deemed heterosexual” (1997, p. 440). She names her main concern as being “centred on those individuals who consistently activate only one characteristic of their identity, or a single perspective of consciousness, to organize their politics, rejecting any recognition of the multiple and intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances” (p. 440). Without an intersectional analysis, Cohen is concerned that queer politics (and by implication, queer theory) will only serve those who have the privilege to engage in single-issue organizing, the type of activism (or scholarship) that would deem a rally for safe and affordable housing as separate from work to challenge heteropatriarchy¹⁰.

Cohen posits a cutting question: “how would queer activists understand politically the lives of women – in particular women of colour – on welfare, who may fit into the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support” (p. 442)? Similarly, we could ask, how would queer theorists make sense of the lives of such women from a scholar's standpoint in academia? Cohen's proposal is for those engaged in queer politics to assume a more “left-centred approach... that designates sexuality and struggles against sexual normalization as central to the

¹⁰ On heteropatriarchy and “how the logic of heteropatriarchy fundamentally structures colonialism, white supremacy and capitalism,” see Smith, A. (2007). *Heteropatriarchy: A building block of empire*. Retrieved July 7, 2012, from <http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/736>

politics of all marginalized communities” (p. 444). This is a small echo to a statement made in 1984 by Diamond and Quinby, two influential feminist theorists, who were attempting to take stock of US-based feminism in what they termed “the age of the body”: “To claim... that lesbianism – or any sexual identity – is in itself a challenge to prevailing power relations is to accept the terms of the enterprise one seeks to defeat” (cited in Turner, 2000, p. 89). Cohen, Diamond, and Quinby were all attempting to do essentially the same thing: identify gaps in their respective fields (feminist theory/queer politics) and, more importantly, propose a course of action or a new analysis that would shift the approach and, in so doing, address the problem from a foundational level. Theorists, such as Muñoz, accomplish such analyses in reflexive and complex ways.

The central theme of Cohen's essay is the complexity of social power and the need for an intersectional analysis on the part of queer activists and theorists (though they are by no means two disparate groups). This is also central to *Disidentifications*, the text I draw from directly in order to deconstruct and unpack the particular video on which my project is focused from the online series *Heavy Petting*. Muñoz's dissection of issues in this text and his framing of performance as a political tool are rare in that they demonstrate a dedication to practicing intersectionality in an academic work. As a theorist, he separates himself from his predecessors (and some of his contemporaries) through his dedication to make complexity and contradiction visible. By outlining a performative queer theory through a set of four slippages, I hope to mirror the ways in which Muñoz practices intersectionality in *Disidentifications* by illuminating fissures and tensions.

Risking Exposure: Troubling the Distinction Between Personal and Public

I now explore how the slippage present between the personal and public spheres is made visible through queer theory and why it is important to the project of this paper. In his text, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, William Turner (2000) begins his project of outlining the development of this academic field by stating that “[i]ntroducing the topic of queer theory is as simple as pointing to violence” (p. 1). He lists off the names of queers who had been brutally murdered around the time when Turner was writing his book. This violence took place within his own country. He names the deceased, the stolen, and briefly cites their cause of death: “Matthew Shepard, pistol-whipped and left hanging from a fence in Wyoming” (p. 1). Turner does not distance himself from these horrors or maintain a rigid distinction between his personal environment and his academic study. He notes that part of our collective mourning for those friends, lovers, sisters, and brothers lost is stained by frustration with the normative structures that place fatal markers of difference on *Othered*¹¹ bodies. Through such an introduction the reader is shown how violence and intimate tragedy partly fuels the work of academics within queer theory and demonstrates a technique to blur the lines between the personal and public spheres.

As part of his introduction to *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, Turner argues that one of the central questions of this field is “why do some bodies matter more than others?”¹² (p. 5) It is important to note here the urgency behind such questions. Queer theory is one of the ways that we, as queers, however located, might find answers to such

¹¹ Here I am referencing Simone de Beauvoir's foundational feminist text, *The Second Sex*, originally published in 1949, in which she describes the process through which one “becomes” a woman as she “is particularly defined according to the particular manner in which the *One* choses to set himself up.” (1989, p. 248) In the context of Turner's text, homophobic violence is done to bodies that are marked in relation to the heterosexual *One*, meaning that the queer body is determined through heteronormative logic.

¹² His word choice is, of course, a hat tip to one of Judith Butler's seminal texts, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”*

questions that cast shadows on our lives. Looking back on my travels through the halls of the Ivory Tower, I note that I had no distinct moment of arrival at this borderless, shifting place of queer theory. Perhaps my *gaydar* led me to connect with professors and students who found ways to use their personal experiences with heterosexism as fodder for scholarly projects? Indeed, it seems that I have yet to encounter someone either in the flesh or on the page whose identity does not compliment their academic pursuits with queer theory. Personal experience has led me to believe that those of us invested in this field are, in some part, brought to it by our need to find reason in a world that seemingly would prefer to see us and our loved ones harassed, marginalized, institutionalized, or dead. Due to these connections, queer theorists characteristically mix personal experience into their academic work, thereby challenging the dichotomy between the personal and public. The importance of this slippage is central to the project of this paper, in which I analyze a video where young queers float between complex discussions of personal autonomy and simultaneously lighthearted and intense conversations about safer sex practices. The risk of inserting personal experience into a project, whether it is an academic paper or an online video, is greatly heightened when those experiences relate to one's sexuality because, for many of us, that is one of the most intimate and vulnerable parts of ourselves.

The Unstable Subject/Viewer Relationship

I will now discuss the second element that I view as central to the specific vein of queer theory that is foundational to this project, which is represented in the slippage exposed between the subject/viewer relationship. In order to demonstrate how queer theorists achieve this exposure, I will be simultaneously discussing the challenge to the dichotomy between low and high culture and theory. I discuss the second and third

elements in tandem because the troubling of the actor/audience split is so eloquently accomplished by theorists who source visual media from the world of low culture and theory. The centrality of this relationship present in Butler's account of gender performativity in the development of queer theory partly explains why queer scholars so often turn to theatre as a communicative medium and as a font of source material¹³. The subject/viewer connection so closely resembles the dynamics of the actor/audience split, in that it is an interdependent relationship that can be affected in ways that blur the imposed distinction past recognition. Consider, for example, the structure of Augusto Boal's forum theatre, where the “spectators,' passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon” are changed “into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action” (1979, p. 122) When is the audience merely assuming a scripted role? When does the actor become the viewer?

I briefly mentioned above the role of feminist theory in the creation of queer theory and the common practice between the two of positing personal experience as politically and academically relevant. Theatre is such a valuable tool of expression because it helps us to both process personal experiences and imagine brighter futures and new possibilities (Dolan, 2005). For this reason, theatre is a particularly promising vehicle for those communities or individuals whose stories have either no or very negative representations in the public sphere. For example, in the introduction to the anthology published in 1996, *Contemporary Plays By Women of Color*, the editors, Kathy Perkins and Roberta Uno, discuss the personal experiences that led them to focus on theatre as an emancipatory medium for women of colour. Uno describes how she felt when she first read the works of Ling-Ai Li, who wrote under her American name of Gladys Li and abandoned her dream of writing for the theatre because she quickly

¹³ See for example Davidoff & Monje, 2012.

learned that 'Orientals' were never allowed to succeed in the world of American entertainment. Recalling Li's documented frustrations, Uno reflects on what little work of women of colour playwrights *has* survived. She writes that their works demonstrate “that our isolation can no longer be enforced once we know about each other's work and struggles.” (p. 8) Both she and Perkins make clear in the introduction to their anthology that there is something particularly promising about the ability of scripts and by implication, performance, to act (pun intended) as first-hand documentation of oppression and resistance.

Resistance and maintaining agency are especially important to the work of queer scholars, who often (re)write or (re)examine histories in order to draw attention to the roles played by subjects who, singularly and in community, have defied the regulatory pressures of majoritarian publics (for example, think of the canonical text *A History of Sexuality* by Foucault). In her text, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003) (undoubtedly a response to Annamarie Jagose's earlier work *Queer Theory: An Introduction*), Nikki Sullivan completes something of a (re)write of the history of the development of the field created by queers who sought to use their positions in academia to alter discourse. She uses visual media, specifically film, “in order to think through some of the possible ways in which we might spill, spoil, quiz, disorder, denaturalise, or, in a word, queer, heteronormativity” (pp. 52-53). One of the visual text she uses, *But I'm A Cheerleader*, is familiar to me as an artefact of a particular generation to which I belong. As a low-budget B movie, it is undoubtedly a piece of low culture. When I was coming out, this film was in the list of 'must-see' features, along with *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Its kitschy quality, similar to many queer movies that are unable to secure sizable production budgets, helps to place this film at a very particular time in Western queer cultural history.

Its popularity is probably due to its ability to affect viewers, most of whom come upon this film during their period of coming out as lesbian, who see themselves in the central character, seventeen-year-old Megan. This type of recognition demonstrates the generative potential of blurring the boundary separating the viewer from the subject, the actor from the audience member. When Megan is sent to a camp to be 'cured' of her sinful desires, which are suspected not through any overt action but rather her appreciation for Melissa Ethridge and Georgia O'Keefe, the viewer may question what they would do were they to be subject to a similar fate.

Nikki Sullivan's engagement with visual texts in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* is supplementary to her other source materials, primarily written, but none seem to be as useful to her project as those bits of low culture that she describes with precise humour and nostalgia. Similarly, in the introduction to their¹⁴ most recent work, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Judith Halberstam explains that the “book darts back and forth between high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing” (p. 2). Through this text, we are shown ways of blurring the lines between high and low theory that creates a performative queer theory. Halberstam is a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California. They first became known for their book, *Female Masculinity*, and since its publication in 1998 Halberstam has continued to explore gendered embodiments and

¹⁴ While their published name is “Judith,” I have also seen them referred to as “Jack.” I include this footnote to acknowledge that the persona that is represented through more official channels does not necessarily reflect how an individual may actually wish to be represented. At this time, I have no way of knowing Halberstam's preferred first name or gender pronoun. I am choosing to use the nondescript pronoun, “they,” rather than the term “s/he,” because the former seems to denote a 'problem' of unknowing that is soon to be neatly resolved once the subject chooses a socially secured category of either female or male.

cultural representation through interdisciplinary queer scholarship. A prime example of how Halberstam manages to blur the lines between low and high culture and theory in *Failure* can be witnessed through their use of the animated children's film *Chicken Run*. The film's story centres on the anthropomorphized members of a certain chicken coop, who organize themselves in order to escape their fate of being baked into pies. I cannot resist seeing parallels between pies and closets¹⁵ in this film. The ways through which the authoritarian farmers (a heteronormative¹⁶ couple, no less) ultimately fail to domesticate the rebel chickens figuratively resembles the ways in which majoritarian logic puts pressure on queer subjects to assimilate. Were the chickens to render themselves passive, they would be doing the work of the farmers by controlling themselves. When brazen queers uncritically enter into state-sanctioned marriages and take out a mortgage on a 3 bedroom house and adopt 2.5 children, when we domesticate ourselves, we do the work of the state. We render ourselves less threatening and agree to carry out the bidding of the institutions that will surely have no qualms about restricting our agency, should we ever choose to revert back to presenting ourselves in public as non-apologetic 'perverts' or unruly drama queens (Munoz, 2009). We enact what Lisa Duggan has termed and explored in great detail: *homonormativity*, which is “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002, p. 179). Since Duggan introduced this term, there has been much debate about what happens when it is used as an accusation against anyone thought to be 'not queer enough.' Gavin Brown, a

¹⁵ Here I am referencing the colloquial phrase “in the closet,” which describes a queer subject who manages their public presentation so as not to “out” themselves and expose their true sexual identity or desires.

¹⁶ For the first documented use of this term, see Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a queer planet. *Social text*, 9, pp. 3–17.

cultural geographer, challenges those of us engaged in queerness “to seek a means of dissolving simplistic binary oppositions between homonormative gay space and 'authentic', 'transgressive' queer space by recognizing the complicity of all these sites in reproducing various normative beliefs and practices” (2009, p. 1498). His charge is complementary to my discussion above of Cathy Cohen's essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”, and the need for a complex understanding of power and identity construction. We must hold ourselves accountable and continue to work toward revolution without leaving certain queers behind. In order to do so, it is helpful to remind ourselves that, as queer subjects, we do not only have two choices: either to assimilate or entirely disconnect from the mainstream cultural landscape that produces low culture, such as children's animated films (Munoz, 1999). Instead, Halberstam demonstrates that both a politic and aesthetic can be built using mixed materials; the creator need not do away with incongruent parts of themselves. Halberstam expertly dances between appreciating the comedic value of the claymation characters' mannerisms in *Chicken Run* and demonstrating how the Marxist allegory of the film “connect to queer notions of self” (p. 29). Thus, the divide between low and high theory/culture is muddled in a productive way that is of particular value to queer cultural workers.

The slippages that Sullivan demonstrates between subject and viewer and that Halberstam exposes between low and high culture/theory are incredibly useful in the context of this paper. When I analyze the video from the online series *Heavy Petting* in chapter four, I discuss the political framework and aesthetic employed by the video's creators. I focus on the ways in which they mirror the tactics used by Halberstam in *Failure* in order to create a visual and theoretical pastiche, an imaginative imitation, of sensational self-help television that is characteristic of our pop culture era of 'reality'

media. I argue that the *Heavy Petting* episode exists in the creative space between assimilation and anti-assimilation. This productive landscape is the subject of José Esteban Muñoz's text, *Disidentifications*, which I draw from extensively in my next chapter as I explain the methods I use when analyzing the video from *Heavy Petting*.

Successful Failures: Parallels Between Queer and Crip Theories

While the particular flavour of Halberstam's work may be unique, their stated appreciation for disorder and chaos is characteristic of much of queer scholarship. I view this as a reflection of the ways that the term “queer” resists static definition through both etymology and practice. Halberstam argues that this tactical “[i]llegibility may in fact be one way of escaping the political manipulation to which all university fields and disciplines are subject” (p. 10). Another approach to chaos and disorder can be found in Robert McRuer's most recent work, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006). By exploring McRuer's text, I outline the fourth element of queer theory central to this paper, as represented through the tenuous wall dividing success and failure. Crip theory is possibly the most suitable framework through which to critique value systems that posit a certain type of productive success against negative failure. One of McRuer's challenges to sterile order and success within neoliberal logics is through *cripping* composition theory: he identifies “the ways in which the cultural demand to produce students who have measurable skills... is connected to the demands... that we inhabit orderly, coherent (or managed) identities.” (p. 5) By using the term *crip* as a verb, he is simultaneously re-appropriating a derogatory slur and signalling those analytical and creative processes through which something might be destabilized to the end of exposing its ableist foundations. For example, if I were to write a paper in which I sought to *crip* corporate floats at the annual Toronto Pride parade, I might focus on the ways in which

certain types of bodies (read able, white, 'attractive,' physically fit and toned) were featured around the TD Bank van. Conversely, if I were to undertake a performance-based project in which I sought similar ends, I might enact a story in which subjects protest the corporatization of Pride by erecting a blockade in front of the TD van with an assemblage of crutches, canes, wheelchairs, and walkers. Of course, in both instances I would want to explicitly ground myself, perhaps choose to name myself as an ally, because I am temporarily able bodied (TAB)¹⁷ and neurotypical.

In *Crip Theory*, McRuer explores visual representations of disability, in various arenas from reality television to off-beat performance art, within a political landscape in the United States that relies on “the flexible logic of neoliberalism” (p. 29). Within this framework, he contends that “all varieties of queerness – and, for that matter, all disabilities – are essentially temporary, appearing only when, and as long as, they are necessary” (p. 30). The visual artefacts he uncovers demonstrate how the success/failure dichotomy operates and how it might be challenged. His dedication to a grounded political analysis is very much in line with the work being done by organizers who work to further develop the Disability Justice (DJ) movement. Mia Mingus, a prominent DJ activist based in the United States, often works within the overlapping spaces between queerness and disability. In a recent piece about the differences between access and wholeness, Mingus argued that DJ is a useful tool for all communities because “[i]t has the power to bring our bodies back into our conversations” (2010, p. 3). As with the texts I have surveyed above, representation and the mutability of identity within the public sphere are common foci of study in queer scholarship.

To support his argument regarding the representations of queerness and disability, and therefore ableist representations of failure and success, McRuer examines the film *As*

¹⁷ For useful terminology, see the page titled “Disability 101: Defining Disability” at <http://disabledfeminists.com/2009/10/07/disability-101-defining-disability/>

Good As It Gets, a romantic comedy that tells the story of a messy love affair between a woman named Carol Connelly and a man named Melvin Udall. From the first scene, Melvin is established as an unlikable character, who is obsessive, anti-social, and pessimistic. His behaviours mark him as 'bizarre' and Melvin is later identified as having obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). McRuer discusses the character construction of this male protagonist critically and notes the ways in which “the depiction of Melvin parallels other cultural representations of people with disabilities: his disability (the anomalous behaviour for which he has been diagnosed and which sets him apart from other people) is conflated with his character flaws (his bigotry)” (p. 23). This is a particularly insidious manifestation of ableism, which comes to a troubling head toward the end of the movie. As Melvin and Carol become closer, Melvin decides that he is going to begin taking the medication prescribed to him for his OCD and couches this new behaviour as part of his desire to become a “better man.” As such, McRuer concludes that in *As Good As It Gets*, “[a]ble-bodied status is achieved in direct proportion to his increasing awareness of, and need for, (heterosexual) romance” (p. 24). In other words, Melvin departs from failure when he successfully enacts an able-bodied and heteronormative presentation. By revealing this problematic character construction, McRuer exposes the ways in which certain definitions of failure and success operate. Similar insights to the ways in which disability is represented in popular culture are what mark *Crip Theory* as an invaluable text for the field of queer theory, particularly at this moment in time when we are faced with the task of finding new ways to challenge capitalism and colonial imaginations that necessitate what Kate Shanley (Assiniboine) terms the “present absence” of Native peoples. We must find creative ways to navigate the ever-changing neoconservative political landscape of both the American and

Canadian colonial states¹⁸. The final element of queer theory, the slippage between success and failure, that I have explored through McRuer's most recent text is incredibly useful to such anti-colonial thinking and to my project.

NAMING DISIDENTIFICATORY PERFORMANCE

Flourish: Muñoz Enters Centre Stage

I now move toward discussing José Esteban Muñoz's text, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) and specifically the three elements he outlines as constitutive of the type of performance against which I analyzed *Heavy Petting*. I return to these three elements in-depth in my fourth chapter. Muñoz's entrance has been preceded by ample exposition: the exploration of terminology key to this project, such as *commons*, and the detailing of a performative queer theory. The groundwork has been sufficiently laid in order to adequately appreciate the power and weight of this particular text within a cultural moment. The complexity of Muñoz's work and his dedication to multiple sites of resistance are what have led me to select *Disidentifications* as the main influence to my project. In this tightly woven text, Muñoz argues against both identificatory (assimilationist) and counter-identificatory (anti-assimilationist) practices as tools that are not flexible enough for the minoritarian subject in a landscape where multiple power structures dictate individuals' life choices. Instead, he makes a case for the use of disidentification, which “allows for a hermeneutic that is at once both a process of subject production and a mode of performance” (Gillespie, 2012, p. 7). The three criteria for this type of performance are: (1) the complexity of power; (2) desire and identification; and (3) the creation of *queerworlds*. Before I explore these

¹⁸ On the facets of white supremacy, the “logic of genocide,” and the maintenance of the colonial state, see Smith, A. (2006). Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing. In INCITE! (Ed.), *Color of violence: the INCITE! anthology* (pp. 66-73). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

elements, I wish to paint a brief yet useful picture of Muñoz's development and location as a scholar dedicated equally to queer and critical race theories.

The Making of a Queen Theorist

Muñoz spent his youth in South Florida with his parents, who immigrated to the United States shortly after Muñoz was born in Havana, Cuba in 1967. He would have been coming of age during a number of racially-charged incidents in Miami. Of course, there is no way of telling how or whether these events shaped Muñoz. However, I wish to make note of one tragedy during his early years because it speaks of a particular cultural moment that bears remembrance in 2012, a year marked by similar horrors, such as the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, an unarmed youth returning to his relative's residence in Florida late one night wearing a hoodie and carrying a bag of Skittles and a can of soda. (These details that so eloquently marked Trayvon's age and innocence were iconically used in memorials marking his death and in protests calling for justice against his killer, George Zimmerman.) A similar yet markedly more incendiary crisis that occurred during Muñoz's youth was the death of Arthur McDuffie, a Black man who died after suffering a horrific beating at the hands of five white Miami-Dade police officers, all of whom were acquitted of charges. The Miami race riots (also known as the McDuffie riots) broke out in May of 1980, a few months after Arthur's death. The intensity of the riots was likely due to the political climate in which McDuffie's death occurred: the Black community in Miami quickly became organized, brought together by a common sense of righteous outrage. The riots are remembered to this day for the amount of damage that was incurred: 18 people were killed (8 white and 10 Black) and \$100 million was claimed in property damage (Meltzer, 2007). Though there is no way of knowing whether the McDuffie riots affected Muñoz, it is an important example in

understanding such violence as part of the landscape in which contemporary critical race theory was developed: an area of study to which Muñoz would later devote himself.

Muñoz earned his PhD in 1994 from the Comparative Literature program at Duke University. Walter D. Mignolo, an Argentine semiotician and critical race theorist, was a member of Muñoz's dissertation committee. Mignolo's most recent work, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, begins with an analysis of the “colonial logic” that has created a current crisis, in which the forces of Western imperialism have devastated localized systems of sustenance around the world and devalued indigenous ways of knowing. (2011) Undoubtedly, Mignolo would have played a significant role in Muñoz's development as an academic and helped him to find ways of intertwining threads from his unique life experiences into his scholarship. As such, Muñoz's readers are charged with the task, nay responsibility, of viewing through two lenses, queer theory and critical race theory, simultaneously.

Powerful Complexities and Discursive Elements

I turn now to an outline of the three elements of disidentificatory performance drawn from Muñoz's text *Disidentifications*: (1) the complexity of power; (2) desire and identification; and (3) the creation of *queerworlds*. I return to these three elements in my analysis of the episode from *Heavy Petting* in order to determine whether or not that video work can be considered to be disidentificatory performance. In his introduction to *Disidentifications*, Muñoz outlines the shortcomings of identity politics and suggests that a disidentificatory assemblage would contribute to “a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit” (p. 6). Part of the purpose behind this re-visioning of identity is to combat the tendency for single-issue organizing to become

divisive. For example, we can see how fissures developed through examining the herstories of oppression within North American-based feminist movements, such as was manifested in the transphobia or racism that tainted the Second Wave.¹⁹ Indeed, “[m]inority identifications are often neglectful or antagonistic to other minoritarian positionalities” (p. 8). We are led to view these divisions, often purposeful in nature, as examples of power as fluid, complex, and relational, which is the first theme in *Disidentifications* that is intertwined with the purpose of this project. The instances of fissure in political movements highlight the ways in which power is not absolute but is situational and can be wielded by both oppressors and the oppressed.

Central to Muñoz's reconstruction of identity is the (re)framing of power based on Foucauldian terms: “...we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault, cited in Muñoz, 1999, p. 19). This operative definition of the complexities of power allows us to unpack and understand how oppression reaches into even those spaces whose members might like to believe their organization or faction is immune to such “discursive elements.” I currently sit on the Board of Directors for the Waterloo Public Interest Research Group (WPIRG), which is an organization based at the University of Waterloo that works on issues of social and environmental justice. A member of a past board, who is a close friend of mine and an Anishnabeg woman, was dismissed without hesitation when she came forward to disclose that she had yet to feel safe and supported in the organization. (I might add that we had numerous conversations during which she was nervously debating whether or not to disclose her feelings.) The assumption on the part of most members was that colonialism and racism could not

¹⁹ See for example, Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

possibly be present in an organization that worked for social justice. We had an anti-oppressive mandate! We held workshops about white supremacy! One of the barriers that I felt I saw as a settler was a very superficial understanding of power held by fellow settlers in the organizational space. If we had put into practice a Foucauldian definition of power such as the one cited above, I would assume that we would have been much better equipped as a group to address the colonialism present in our working space. In my analysis of the video from the *Heavy Petting* series, I pay particular attention to how the creators navigate their positions of authority and take stock of their artistic symbolism against a Foucauldian understanding of power.

Performing Desire and Identification

Such a layered and flexible framework of power as explained above is necessary *especially* when the topic at hand is desire or sexuality. Dominant ideals of beauty and heteropatriarchal models of intimate relationships directly shape our understandings of our desires and what is for many of us the most sacred and vulnerable parts of our bodies. The formation of desire in a discursive landscape is the second element discussed in *Disidentifications* that is foundational to the aims of this paper. Muñoz explains that the “negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of the important work of disidentification” (p. 12). There has been much feminist and race-based scholarship on the subject of how elements such as advertising or pornography bind what is considered a possible or viable sexual identity for an individual or a particular community.²⁰ In the introduction to his project, one that is dedicated to the performances of queers of colour, Muñoz investigates the work of Marga Gomez, who is a Puerto Rican

²⁰ See for example, Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. New York: Touchstone; Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. London: Vintage Books; Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.

and Cuban-American performance artist. In 2004, Gomez was the recipient of a GLAAD award for Off-Broadway theatre, in recognition for a long list of works in which she had starred or had produced. Recurring themes in her creative work include Chicana lesbian identities, subversive desire, and humour as a tool of resistance and self-formation.

Muñoz describes Gomez's 1992 performance, *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*, and details one scene in which Gomez recalls her childhood experience of viewing a talk show during which “lady homosexuals” were being interviewed. She parodies the performances of the interviewees and “performs her disidentificatory desire for this once toxic representation” (p. 3) of the one-dimensional lesbians as women living lives of painful secrecy. Muñoz identifies her performance as an example of disidentification, which he claims “is a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse” (p. 19). Thus, Muñoz invites us to view Gomez's performance as a story of a necessary recycling and repurposing of mainstream representations. In the process of recalling her childhood awakening, Gomez does not throw away those aspects that are toxic or antithetical to her current identity. Instead, she reworks the artefacts of her youth – disidentifies with them – in humorous ways that allow her to retain parts of her self-realization, while being critical of the ways in which majoritarian ideologies have shaped her desires and limited her access to appropriate reflections of herself.

In Chapter Four of *Disidentifications*, Muñoz unpacks the “terrorist drag” performances of Vaginal Creme Davis, who is a mixed-race performance artist. Her work spans genres and flavours, beginning with her rise to prominence in the Los Angeles punk scene in the early 1990's. Muñoz focuses his study of Davis's work on the live show *The White to Be Angry*. It is taken to be exemplary of the clear difference between the genre of terrorist drag, with which Davis is aligned, and the “sanitized corporate drag and even traditional gay drag.” Muñoz argues that the latter is an example of counteridentification,

which “often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse, reinstates that same discourse” (p. 97). It is, therefore, unable to do what Davis's political drag accomplishes, a performance that “is about creating an uneasiness, an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric” (p. 100).

Utopian Blueprints: The Creation of *Queerworlds*

Part of what Muñoz clearly values about such performances is their ability to create new *queerworlds* through such subversion and complication of normative values. He believes that “[q]ueer performance... is about transformation, about the powerful and charged transformation of the world, about the world that is born through performance” (p. xiv). This emancipatory potential of performance is the third theme present in *Disidentifications* that correlates with the focus of this paper. In a recent interview, Muñoz argued that we need “an idea of utopia that is not just escapism” and he followed that call with a prescription: “[q]ueer art or queer aesthetics potentially offer us blueprints and designs for other ways of living in the world” (Isé, 2011). In order to demonstrate the generative power of queer performance within *Disidentifications*, Muñoz summons the work of Chicana artist Osa Hidalgo, specifically her video *Marginal Eyes* or *Mujería Fantasy 1*. The plot includes a fictional Chicana archaeologist who uncovers artefacts that tell the story of how the (remade) state of California came to be the feminist utopia it is at the time of her discovery. The heads of the political institutions are Native women, Chicanas, and other women of colour.

The final scene of the video documents the love-making of two Chicana dykes, one of whom is the archaeologist. Their intimacy is set against a backdrop of an educational film that follows other archaeological discoveries, ones that represent the origins of patriarchal cultures. The juxtaposition, with the Chicanas in the flesh and in the

foreground of the frame, continues the fantasy scape of Hildalgo's video that places minoritarian subjects in positions of power. Muñoz claims that this final scene “offers a powerful utopian proposition: it is through the transformative powers of queer sex and sexuality that a queerworld is made” (p. 23). Here is where the power of desire and the performative creation of alternate realities collide. Such creations are, in part, survival strategies that “the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (p. 4). These two interdependent themes of desire and queerworld creation, presented within a framework of power as fluid and complex, help me to create a strong foundation upon which to build the rest of this paper. As I unpack and deconstruct the video from the series *Heavy Petting*, I make repeated reference to the generative potential of queer performance that Muñoz argues for in *Disidentifications*. I borrow some of Muñoz's analytical techniques couched in the way he describes the performances referenced above in order to determine whether or not the *Heavy Petting* video is an example of disidentificatory performance.

SUMMARY

The terminology and concepts outlined herein constitute the foundation upon which I have built this thesis. The queer theory primer at the beginning of this chapter might have been redundant to some readers and revolutionary for others. Similarly, the terms I discussed – *commons*, *performance*, *performative*, *performativity* – have particular meaning within these pages that differ from some popular usage. In my next chapter, the reason for the performative turn I take in utilizing queer theory will become clear as I outline how I built my method for analyzing the episode from *Heavy Petting*. Throughout this thesis, I will return to the slippages I explored in this chapter that trouble

four sets of [constructed] dichotomies: (1) personal and public spheres; (2) subject and viewer (or actor and audience); (3) low and high theory; and (4) failure and success. I will also revisit the three central elements of what Jose Esteban Munoz terms *disidentificatory performance* discussed above were: (1) the complexity of power; (2) desire and identification; and (3) the creation of *queerworlds*. They feature heavily in my analysis and discussion of the themes I discovered in the episode from *Heavy Petting*.

CHAPTER THREE Methodology

I was recently at a family function where the “awkward factor,” as I used to say as a disgruntled teenager, was relatively high. My mother recently remarried and this dinner was to bring the two families together. I use the term “families” loosely, as my mother and I were the only representatives of the Ligate name and we were outnumbered seven-fold by her partner's relatives. Before any event where I know I will be meeting new people, I take a minute to decide what parts of myself I want to reveal. Do I come out as queer or do I inaccurately simplify myself to a lesbian, for the sake of avoiding a long discussion? Do I talk about my academic work and mention that I watch videos about fisting as part of my thesis work? Maybe it was because this dinner was on my home turf at my mother's house or maybe it was the timing of the event, the day after I went to a panel on queer affects at York University. Whatever the reason, I chose, in the words of Weezer, my favourite alternative rock band from my childhood, to 'let it all hang out.' After the fourth bottle of wine at the table had been opened, I found myself explaining to an audience of five adults, all of whom I was meeting for the first time that night, the importance for queer artists to repurpose imagery from heterosexist visual landscapes (e.g. advertising). I could feel my face turning red in response to the five pairs of glass eyes trained on my mouth. Just as I was about to give up and excuse myself to the children's table, one of the older women toward the opposite end of the table inserted herself in the conversation and said, “Well, you know, I just love *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.” I was at a loss for words. “I think they should cancel Debbie Curtis' show and get some more gay men on,” she continued. “They sure do know how to use colours!” With that, everyone started nodding and the five women who had five seconds ago looked at me like deer in headlights erupted into side conversations about purple

drapes and the set of *Will and Grace*.

I am reminded of this evening as I launch into describing how I built my process of viewing *Heavy Petting*. Though I will explain all the steps I took in detail, there is something about my perspective that cannot be captured in a formal account of my method. Experiences such as that family dinner have taught me that some disparities between queer people and straight people, particularly the heterosexuals whose social circles and cultural environment are entirely devoid of anything non-normative, run so deep that they almost elude written description. With that disclaimer in place, I begin this chapter with an attempt to move closer to pinpointing the particular queerness of my analytical lens. I discuss the importance of grounding my viewing of the video from *Heavy Petting* in an understanding of a postmodernist visual culture, in part to explain what the creators are able to do from their position as indie media artists. I briefly chart how the practices of modernists led to the development of the tension present in postmodernism between politics and aesthetics. In this discussion, I will consider two exemplary techniques available to the postmodern cultural worker: reflexivity and pastiche. As I decipher the video from *Heavy Petting* in my next chapter, I pay close attention to the ways in which the creators, who are also the two main 'characters' in the series, reflect their politics through their aesthetic and how their aesthetic influences their stated political aims. I use the term "deciphering" (instead of interpretation) in the style of Sylvia Wynter, who wrote that "[decipherment] seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered *to do*" (1992, p. 266). I view the video through a postmodern lens, which leads me to focus on the grey edges and those visual cues that signify complexity.

After I discuss the postmodernist context in which *Heavy Petting* is located and detail how such a landscape is important in my analysis of the video, I outline the process

of my analysis. In my analysis, I was looking to determine whether or not the episode from *Heavy Petting* is an example of disidentificatory performance. In order to do this, I measured the video against the three main threads present in José Esteban Muñoz's text *Disidentifications*, which I discussed in detail in my previous chapter. The three components I discussed were: (1) the complexity of power; (2) desire and identification; and (3) the creation of *queerworlds*. I conclude this chapter with an examination of the techniques used by Muñoz in his analysis of Richard Fung's autoethnographic performances. I have chosen this analysis of Fung because both he and the creators of *Heavy Petting* use similar narrative techniques and both are invested in projects that focus on intimacy. Indeed, disidentification itself is most compelling as a political tool and stylized performance when the subject and viewer are invited to engage with such themes as sexuality or belonging. I recount my four-staged viewing of the video and discuss the role that my community graciously played in helping me to arrive at my findings. I conclude this chapter with a brief account of the birth of *Heavy Petting* in order to further inform the reader and contextualize my analysis.

Political Aesthetics in Postmodern Visual Cultures

Thomas Docherty, an influential writer on cultural criticism and literature, wrote the introduction to a collection of seminal texts in 1993 on the historical development and current iterations of the ever-shifting area of postmodernist thought, simply titled *Postmodernism*. In his introduction, Docherty states that there is an “underlying tension between an attitude to postmodernism as an aesthetic style and postmodernity as a political and cultural reality” (p. 3). This friction is a hallmark of postmodernist visual culture that is central to my project. It is likely an easily understood element to those of us who have navigated social landscapes coloured by a saturation of multimedia. Visual

material reaches into our lives in both the public and private spheres *and* in the liminal spaces between them that I discussed in the previous chapter as one of the three central slippages of a performative queer theory. In their instructive text published in 2009, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Cartwright and Sturken elaborate on the tension named by Docherty. They note that “although postmodernism may not be about style alone, style is one of the chief characteristics of a postmodern ethos,” (p. 313) as “it relies heavily on style and image to produce its worlds” (p. 314). In my analysis of the *Heavy Petting* video, I focus on how the visual cues reflect the postmodernist pull between politics and aesthetics by considering the cyclical relationship between the characters' costumes, their gestures or embodied style, and their stated belief systems. I strive to find value in both the complexity of the imagery present in the video and in the superficial flair and glitter on the screen. This move follows Cartwright and Sturken's claim that “[p]ostmodernism dispels the idea that surface does not contain meaning in itself or that structures lie beneath the mask of surface appearances” (p. 314).

A sustained tension between aesthetics and politics creates an environment, a visual landscape, in which beliefs, values, and style collide to create meaning. A critical piece of postmodernist politics is the rejection of *metanarratives* (dominant ideology, explanatory frameworks) and the acceptance of the presence and value of multiple truths (Cartwright & Sturken, 2009). Jean-François Lyotard, a formative thinker in postmodernism, identified that when there is a forced consensus or an explicit pressure on participants in a dialogue to reach agreement, such discussions are ruled by a “soft imperialism” (cited in Docherty, 1993, p. 25). He argues instead for a search of “dissensus” (p. 26), for generative disagreement, which he believes leads to creative thinking and a flow of ideas. This is a particularly important aspect in the context of this

paper. The video I analyze in my next chapter is about sex and sexuality: what topic could possibly benefit more from dissensus, from multiple competing truths? Essentialist definitions of sexual practices and desires are the most effective tools used to control non-normative bodies and communities, especially those who exist in sites of intersecting oppressions, such as working-class queers, women of colour, and Native peoples.²¹

Resurrecting Epic Theatre in Postmodern Indie Media

One of the visual techniques available to the postmodernist cultural worker that I will be looking for in my analysis of the *Heavy Petting* video is reflexivity and critical disillusionment. In order to understand its importance in the context of this paper, it is crucial to understand how it was used historically. Modernists used reflexivity in order to break the illusion of the narrative structure, thereby inviting the viewer to think critically about the encoded messages and meanings within the visual text (Cartwright & Sturken, 2009). Bertold Brecht is remembered for his development of the genre known as Epic Theatre, characterized by techniques such as *verfremdungseffekt*, which is a tool used to render a *gestus* (an action signifying a character's status or relationships) contradictory. The clearest example of this distancing technique is the silent scream, first practiced by Helene Weigel²², whose most cited roles was that of Mother Courage in the Brechtian play of the same name. When the character is shown her dead son's body at the end of the third scene, Weigel chose to signify Mother's anguish by turning her head, opening her mouth wide, and gesture to the action of screaming while remaining absolutely silent. The effect, as described by a spectator, of this “silence which screamed and screamed

²¹ See for example, Smith, A. (2005). *Conquest: Sexual violence and the American Indian genocide*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

²² Helene Weigel is remembered as one of the greatest European actors of the 20th century. Weigel later married Brecht and, after his death, assumed sole responsibility of the Berliner Ensemble (Brecht's company), until her death in 1971.

throughout the theatre [made] the audience bow their heads as if they had been hit by a blast of wind” (Steiner, cited in Dobson & Needlands, 2000, p. 107). This *gestus* and its accompanying *verfremdungseffekt*, created by Weigel's otherwise immobile body, encouraged the audience to view Mother Courage's experiences not with agonizing empathy but with critical distance. Thus, instead of focusing on Mother's heartache, the audience is left to contemplate the militaristic mechanisms that so ruthlessly killed her son in the interests of the state.

Reflexivity within a postmodernist context is, generally speaking, markedly different from the politically critical gaze encouraged through performance such as Weigel's portrayal of Mother Courage. Advertisers and media producers working for conglomerates and driven by profit rarely seek to affect a distancing *verfremdungseffekt* in the texts they produce. Instead, they “offer us reflexive techniques of disillusionment... as forms of intellectual play, ...without offering viewers any significant critical or political message beneath the reflexive joke” (Cartwright & Sturken, 2009, p. 322). Thankfully, there remain spaces that are not as tightly caged by capitalist contracts, such as the critically ironic world of indie media. In this realm, creators are not as strictly bound to profit margins and are, therefore, less likely to suffer damage (i.e. loss of viewers, funding cuts) should their productions deal with controversial material, especially content that questions or undermines the authority or quality of the institutions that control our public spheres (i.e. the federal government, the corporate media industry). As Cartwright and Sturken explain in their discussion of indie media, players in this realm are able to more closely recreate the explicitly political techniques used by modernists, such as *verfremdungseffekt* and other tools that create a critical disillusionment.

METHOD

“Postcolonial Mimicry” and Narration: Richard Fung's Performance of Desire

My process of building a method of viewing began with trying to identify the steps that Munoz takes in *Disidentifications* (1999) in order to determine what about a performance artists work makes it disidentificatory. I focused on charting the analytical techniques employed by Muñoz in his analysis of Richard Fung's autoethnographic performance, specifically his 1991 piece titled, *My Mother's Place*. I chose this particular example because Munoz's focuses on Fung's narrative techniques that allowed him to create a documentary that blended [hi]story and art. His focus was similar to my intention to identify how the creators of *Heavy Petting* tempered the instructive nature of their 'talk show' so as to not bore or alienate their audience. The documentary format, as with the talk show structure, can be dull and purely factual unless the creator finds a way of creatively altering their form. Munoz discovers that Fung creates excitement by using innovative narrative techniques. In the following, I identify Munoz's method of viewing that leads him to this discovery. I then explain how I have built upon his method in constructing my own.

Fung is a gay man of Chinese heritage who grew up in Trinidad surrounded by stories of how the island gained its independence in 1962. He is currently based in Toronto and is Associate Professor in the Integrated Media program at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Much of his dramatic work as a performance artist deals with the contradictions that were present in his youth between his ancestry and his land base, his interior monologues and his public presentation, and his sexuality and his familial expectations. *My Mother's Place* opens with a piece of narration in which Fung, as a member of the Chinese diaspora and as a colonial subject, recalls his complicated identification with the Queen. He and his sister would practice waving their hands,

wrapped in white socks, in the Queen's signature gesture. Muñoz frames this childhood memory as exemplary of what Homi Bhabha, an influential post-colonial theorist, termed “colonial mimicry,” which he describes as “a process of disavowal,... the sign of the double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates the other as it visualizes power'” (1994, p. 86). This mimicry becomes a tool of disidentification for the hybridized subject, whose very being is marked by those instances where meaning does not align in ways easily recognized in comparison to globally hegemonic personalities. Muñoz identifies the usefulness of hybridity as a tool in reference to “how queer lives are fragmented into various identity bits: some of them adjacent, some of them complementary, some of them antagonistic” (p. 79). He analyzes *My Mother's Palace* for its ability to make hybridity and queerness visible and therefore *intelligible* to eyes that usually do not register the performative cues of such complex processes.

Even more important in this reading of Fung's performance is the location of the hybridized and queer subject as a powerful knower of his own experiences. Fung assumes a powerful position in *My Mother's Place* as the one who narrates and thus directly shapes how his story is told. Its shape and structure is characteristic of autoethnography, a genre that “worries easy binarisms such as colonized and the colonizer” (p. 82) similarly to how queer theories troubles other dichotomies, as discussed in the previous chapter. Muñoz pays close attention to the ways in which Fung embodies the role of the narrator that are similar, yet different from the conventions of the invasive cinematic genres of ethnography. In order to chart Fung's subversion of tropes, Muñoz examines performance tools relating to omniscient telling in *My Mother's Place*, especially voice-over narration. Fung sometimes inserts his voice in ways that are disconnected from his body, which, coupled with the fact that these additions are often

made at the end of scenes as if to signify some sort of conclusion, has the effect of granting him some authority of the story he is telling through his film. This 'voice' is not always audible: in the second half of *My Mother's Place*, Fung makes choices about what is and is *not* included in the screen in order to tell his story. He uses a series of family photographs throughout his film to invite the viewer into the world of his childhood. Toward the end of the film, Fung chooses to fill the screen with a photo of a young Richard and Rita Fung, his mother. After a moment of silence, text appears over the image: "These pictures show more about my family's desire than how we actually lived." This 'silent' narration technique, the text caption, creates a similar effect to Fung's segments of voice-over. Muñoz's focus on narration, on how the minoritarian subject gives voice to how they make sense of their complex and contradictory processes of identity formation, seems to be a recurring analytical focus in his chapter on Fung's performances and in the entirety of *Disidentifications*. It would seem that voice, whether audible or represented by what the creator chooses to include in the screen, reveals a great deal about how (or whether) the producers are engaging with disidentificatory practices.

“Queerdar”: The Process of Critical Viewing

- Alice:* [she and Shane are trying to teach Dana gaydar] What is she? [pointing to a woman at the bar]
- Dana:* [hesitates] A customer? [Shane shakes her head] I don't know!
- Shane:* Dana, look at her fingernails, are they long or short?
- Alice:* Are they polished or natural?
- Dana:* They're long and polished. [she looks at Alice] Sooo, she's... [looks to Alice to see if she will fill in the blank]
- Shane:* Leaning to straight, but we still need more info.
- Alice:* [in response to Dana's frustrated sigh] Look at the shoes.
- Dana:* High-heeled sandals.
- Alice:* With tapered jeans. [in response to Dana's very flummoxed expression] Would you wear high-heeled sandals with tapered jeans?
- Dana:* [looking back and forth between Shane and Alice, looking very confused] Yes?
- Alice:* [firmly] No.

(*The L Word*, 2004)

I conducted a critical content analysis, a close reading of the visual text that pays particular attention to the political and social meanings of the codes found within, of the fifth episode from the online series *Heavy Petting*. I have constructed what Holliday (2007) terms a queer methodology: “a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour” (p. 260). My methods exist in direct relationship to my theoretical groundings, thus I am engaging in a “critical performance pedagogy [that] moves from the global to the local, the political to the personal, the pedagogical to the performative” (Denzin, 2008, p. 62). I have chosen the fifth episode of *HP* for my analysis for a few reasons. First, the structure of the series has been solidly established. Since their first episode, the artist-educators have made slight changes to their narrative devices. For example, the introduction now features an introduction set to music and complete with a viewer advisory to indicate that the content

of the video features candid conversations about sex and sexuality and is “NSFW” (not safe for work.) Second, in this episode Luxery and Legay begin by saying that they have reflected on past videos and have chosen for this episode to be a bit more relaxed and more honestly represent their personalities. Specifically, they explain why in this video they both drink “relaxing” beverages (alcoholic) in order to be more “real.” This action is a concrete example of the performative techniques that Luxery and Legay utilize in each video but particularly in episode five to defuse the heaviness of the topics that they cover. They normalize the queries posted by their viewers by answering honestly and by speaking in a tone that conveys their comfort with talking about what are usually kept as private matters.

My process of viewing was broken up into four stages. First, I watched the episode three times in a row and assumed the position of spectator. I wanted to become familiar enough with the video on a superficial level so that I could understand its fundamental structure. I was looking to chart the emotional arc of the episode and form a basic description of it as though I were writing a review. I took extensive notes and I paid particular attention to the mannerisms and actions of the two char/actors that signified their relationship to each other, such as glancing to each other in the middle of a sentence. Second, I created a physical map and broke the video into major 'events,' which were mostly divided by the audience questions the actors were answering. For example, the first event was the opening credits. The second event was the welcome message that Luxery and Legay delivered to suit both returning viewers and potential newcomers. The third and subsequent events were their responses to the questions submitted to them by their viewers. (For example: “Sometimes I pee when I cum. It makes me feel stupid and embarrassed. Please – any advice on how to avoid this? Is it normal?”) The final event was the closing credits. This structured map enabled me to take detailed notes in the third

stage of my viewing process, which involved watching the video five times. I focused on recording elements in the video that were connected to or exemplary of the three criteria for disidentificatory performance that I determined from José Esteban Muñoz's 1999 text, *Disidentifications*, which I will discuss in detail shortly. The countless hours spent watching sections of *Heavy Petting* over and over at times, when I thought my eyes were going to morph into the shape of my computer screen, I jokingly coined the term for myself, *queerdar*. (I suppose this is one of the small things academics and researchers do to keep themselves amused.) Similarly to the ways we use *gaydar*²³, at a certain point I placed my trust in my *queerdar* to point me toward the grey edges of the video where critical disidentification was taking place. For example, as a not-so-closeted cat lady who lives in what has been affectionately dubbed the “Pussy Palace” (think four queer women and five cats), I was naturally drawn to the lace-edged pictures of cats on the wall behind Luxery and Legay. I listened to my *queerdar* and spent time with the pictures and considered their significance in the visual landscape of the video frame. This led me to think about how Luxery and Legay repurpose stereotypes. Subsequently, repurposing became a central theme in my analysis.

In the third stage of viewing, I also focused on how Luxery and Legay embodied their roles as talk show hosts. Their positions are imbued with authority: they are instructing their viewers and responding to specific inquiries. This gives Luxery and Legay tremendous power and in my third stage of the viewing process I paid attention to how they use or trouble their power. As I discussed above, in his analysis of Fung's performance, Muñoz pays close attention to the ways in which Fung embodies the role of the narrator. Muñoz looks for actions that signal a departure from the conventions of the invasive cinematic genres of ethnography. I similarly tried to note when Luxery and

²³ Gaydar is the putative ability for homos to sense or recognize each other based on the smallest of clues.

Legay questioned or poked fun at themselves, for example, which I took as symbolic of attempts to unsettle their positions of power.

In the fourth stage, my viewing process shifted from a purely solitary endeavour to a friendly gathering. Having a step in my viewing process that was communal was one critical way that I *queered* this project. I asked two close friends, whose politics and academic work I admire, to join me for an evening of sharing food and watching *Heavy Petting*. As we ate, I explained my project to them: its purpose, my theoretical groundings, and my progress to date. I recounted the steps in my viewing process that I had taken thus far and presented a summary of my preliminary findings. I told them that I had reached a point where I felt it was not only helpful but necessary to invite other self-identified queers to participate in my analysis. I felt it would be hypocritical of me to write about the need for a young queer commons while sitting alone at my desk. Before we began viewing, I explained that I wanted them to first watch the video purely for entertainment and then I wanted them to re-watch it and look for any of the three criteria of disidentificatory performance. The positive results of this communal viewing were two-fold. Firstly, I was thankful that their reactions were generally concurrent to mine but that they were able to articulate them from two different perspectives. This inspired me to later return to my notes and consider my findings in new terms. Secondly, I was incredibly grateful that I was reminded by their laughter that part of the power of *Heavy Petting* lies in the balanced tone of the series. After watching the video so many times, I had lost sight of its comedic value. The creators demonstrate great respect for their viewers, as evidenced by their thorough and honest responses to the questions submitted online. The weight of this reverence and of the subject matter (intimate questions about sexuality and gender) is tempered by Luxery and Legay's intimate humour.

PERFORMATIVE EDUCATION: THE VIDEO WORK OF “MAJESSTICA”**The Luxery-Legays First Video: *Fisting 101***

I now offer a very brief account of the birth of *Heavy Petting* in order to further inform the reader and contextualize my following analysis. After their marriage, the details of which were made very public online, Jessica Luxery and Majestic Legay began referring to themselves collectively as “Majesstica” (a mix of their two first names). As this newly titled unit, they published a video on the hosting site Vimeo about how to engage in fisting²⁴ in a way that prioritizes pleasure, consent, and safety. The video starts with a vignette: the camera slowly pans the room, so that we see the art hanging on the walls and the objects resting on top of a dresser (see figures 3.1 & 3.2). The voice over during this sequence is of someone moaning and voicing positive reactions (i.e. “yes”) and of someone else asking brief questions and checking in with the other person (i.e. “do you need more lube?”). The camera eventually arrives at Jessica's face, who we now understand is the person moaning (see figure 3.3). We soon learn that Majestic Legay was the person whose gloved hand we see reaching up from the bottom of the screen to hold Luxery's arm to the wall. Whether or not this sequence was staged or whether the videographer filmed Luxery and Legay actually engaging in fisting is almost irrelevant. Either way, we are led to believe that the couple practices this act as part of their sexual repertoire because they *perform* their roles with such visceral intention. Thus, the viewer is told that they can trust the advice given in this instructional video that is both educational and performative. Most of the instruction is discussed while Luxery and Legay use their hands to approximate the stages of fisting. Luxery's hands are in a prayer position, representing a vagina, through which Legay inserts their fist. Almost throughout the entire video, Legay has their thumb on the clitoris (represented by where Luxery's

²⁴ Fisting is a sexual practice in which one inserts either part or the entirety of their fist into their partner, usually into the vagina.

pinky fingers meet) to demonstrate the importance of focusing on the receiver's pleasure, rather than the 'progress' of the giver's fist (see figure 3.4). The video concludes with recommendations of written materials and other resources that the viewer can access to learn more about fisting and the other topics mentioned in the video, such as consent.



Figures 3.1 & 3.2. Screenshots from the opening vignette to the video *Fisting 101*.

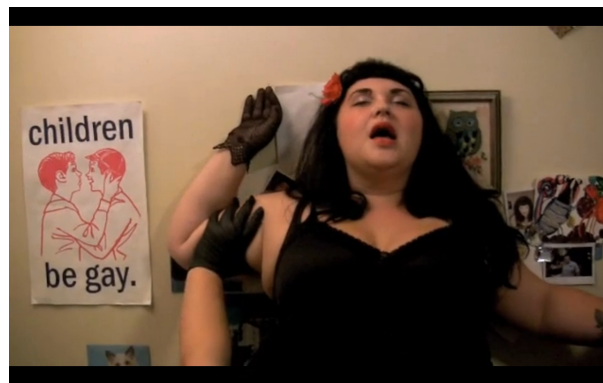


Figure 3.3. A screenshot from the opening vignette to the video *Fisting 101* of Jessica Luxery moaning while being fisted by her partner, Majestic Luxery.



Figure 3.4. A screenshot from *Fisting 101* of Majestic Luxery inserting their fist into the 'vagina', represented by Jessica Luxery's hands. In this frame, Luxery is seen pretending to apply lube to their partner's vagina. Luxery's humorous shirt reads, "I FIST ON THE FIRST DATE ♥".

The Birth of *Heavy Petting*

Majesstica's first video received a great deal of attention online. The visible feedback from their viewers was overwhelmingly positive. For example, a comment made by a user named Julia on the first *Heavy Petting* episode resembles many others: "i fucking love you guys. i love how you guys speak to a really broad spectrum of folks, and define what queer sex is in an open awesome way." Shortly after *Fisting 101* had made the proverbial rounds of online queer youth communities, the artists debuted their new series, *Heavy Petting (HP)*. As previously mentioned, the basic structure of the show very closely mirrors that of help or advice television, such as *Dr. Phil* or *Oprah*. Often when responding to questions they agree with each other and each contribute complimentary opinions. Sometimes, they disagree or make clear that they approach certain topics differently, either because of personal experience or political viewpoint. This performance of dissensus is one of the elements that distinctly separates *HP* from other sexual health resources online. In their artist statement, they explain: "[f]or too long

we have watched idly while resources and education around sexual health, love and relationships continue to miss the mark. As heavy petters, we believe that people should be able to access funny, relevant, helpful, non-judgmental and supportive information that has the potential to enrich their lives, relationships and sexcapades.” Thus, we understand the need for such a video series and hear the passion in the artists' writing: clearly, this project is near and dear to their hearts. It is clear, through the ways that they honestly feature themselves as individuals and as a couple in the series, that this video represents not only a desire to create more accessible and queer-centred education but also personal passions about love and sexual freedoms. In their mission statement, they state that this project is meant to address the needs of people of all genders, orientations, and desires. This diversity is represented in the questions that they choose to discuss in each video.

CHAPTER FOUR

Analysis

During the period of time when I was analyzing the fifth episode from *Heavy Petting*, I had a dream that I was a child again, watching television after school while eating a block of cheese, knowing that I would be scolded for ruining my appetite before dinner. (It is not at all surprising that a decade after leaving home, my mother's stern voice still resonates in my subconscious.) I was watching an episode of Dr. Phil and he was interviewing a couple whose marriage had turned sour. Dr. Phil's 'prescription' was for the pair to go to San Francisco during gay Pride celebrations. He told them that they were sure to rediscover their passion for each other. I remember thinking in the dream that Dr. Phil seemed to be speaking with a limp and that his nails were painted pink. At that time in the land of the waking, I had been watching a few specific clips of the *Heavy Petting* episode and looking for visual markers that represented a queering of the help show trope. Vivid dreams of alternate realities are one of the perks of academic work that was not included in benefits listed in my acceptance package to University. Beyond it being a humorous anecdote, I begin with this account of my dream of a more fabulous Dr. Phil for the sake of offering a brief reminder that the following recounted analysis was not executed in a vacuum. If I have been successful as a queer academic, you will find the odd speck of glitter throughout this chapter.

This chapter begins with a presentation of the four main themes that emerged from my viewing of *Heavy Petting* and how they speak to the potential value of disidentificatory performance as a generative tool. I frame these four themes in terms of what is needed in order for a young queer commons to be self-sufficient. These needs are: (1) tools for queering toxic topos; (2) communication methods that allow for dissensus; (3) stylish politics grounded in a subversive aesthetic; and (4) role models and educators

who will help create an intimate *queerworld*, in the words of Muñoz. By framing my analysis this way, I am working toward discovering an answer for two of my research questions: What are the roles of the aesthetic in a performative queer politic? And what is the potential value of using disidentificatory performance as a tool for community building among young queers? As explained in the previous chapter, I executed my analysis through a postmodern lens: this lead me to prioritize reception and sensuality. Throughout this chapter I include screenshots and images in order to more clearly reference the stylistic choices made by the creators of *Heavy Petting* and to mirror the referential nature of online communities where users constantly cross-post visual material.

QUEERWORLD DISORDER: THE NEEDS OF A YOUNG QUEER COMMONS

Humour and Dissensus: Tools for Queering Toxic Tropes

I turn now to the first of the four-part account of my findings from my analysis of the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting* as framed through the needs of a young queer commons. In my previous chapter, I located this video as an artefact of a postmodern visual culture. One of the tools available to the indie media creator is *pastiche*, a type of imitation that combines or references elements from other sources (Cartwright & Sturken, 2009). A key strategy of this type of assemblage is challenging the status of the original. *Heavy Petting* is undoubtedly a queer pastiche of the help show trope in which the advisors, Luxery and Legay, establish themselves as trustworthy through the use of humour. Their wit and silliness make them believable and easy to relate to: they are not 'experts', rather they are a friendly couple who dish out advice based equally on personal experience and political viewpoints. As accessible figures, they resist establishing themselves as authorities, in keeping with the postmodern impulse. For example, they

poke fun at each other and embrace disagreement. They will openly admit when they do not have the answer to a question and will provide links after the video is published to supplementary materials. Thus, the original structure of the help show is undermined through the visible practice of dissensus. This balancing act between knower and expert is reflective of the link between *Heavy Petting* and the type of artistry examined in *Disidentifications*. One of the criteria for disidentificatory performance as previously discussed is an understanding of power as complex and constituted not by absolutes but rather by discursive elements. Luxery and Legay's critical pastiche of the help show structure puts this element into practice: the creators admit that they are knowers in that they choose to set up their performance about giving advice. However, they unsettle themselves by calling their authority and each other into question throughout the episode.

Communicating Dissensus: The Comedic Characters of Luxery and Legay

The second need of the young queer commons is for communication methods that allow for dissensus. There is tremendous instructive value in pseudo-celebrities or role models demonstrating this type of generative communication, as we see in the *Heavy Petting* videos, which would not have gained such popularity if Luxery and Legay were not believable advisors. They establish themselves as having experiential wisdom in large part because their personal lives are made so public on their individual tumblr pages. Their sets are also riddled with visual markers that denote authenticity. For example, in the left-hand side of the screen in episode five, we see a leather ball gag hanging from the wall (a sex toy that prevents the wearer from speaking properly, usually associated with bondage or BDSM). We believe them when they say in a video that they know what consensual sex feels like because they also talk about it on other platforms. Their popularity, which has transferred to *Heavy Petting* thanks to the intertextual nature of the

internet, is also supported through their use of humour. They purposefully edit their videos as to include moments when they break down in laughter or engage in shenanigans. As previously mentioned, Legay and Luxery make clear in the beginning of episode five that they are enjoying alcoholic beverages. By the end of the video, it is clear that the alcohol has had some effect on their composure. They become more gregarious and make more jokes with each other and with the viewer. For example, near the end of the episode, the pair announce that they have just received a question via their email account (“hot off the presses!” in Luxery’s words) that they would like to answer. Legay begins to read it aloud but has difficulty. They assemble their fingers in the shapes of ovals as to approximate glasses and holds them up to their eyes (see figure 4.1). Luxery and Legay are laughing sporadically through this scene. Even though they are fooling around and they have likely had quite a bit to drink, they remain incredibly articulate. This communicates that the artist-educators have collectively built a very solid knowledge foundation informed by radical and body-centred politics. Once in a while, Luxery and Legay pepper their responses with very formal language that suggests that they have both had access, whether directly or indirectly, to academic forms of learning. Their confidence and diction are tempered with humour to the effect of establishing themselves as trustworthy yet approachable knowers. This balancing act is reflective of the complexity of power that is central to Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*, in that the artist-educators employ a variety of discursive elements to deliver strong and accessible personas to the viewer.



Figure 4.1. A screenshot from the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting*. Here we see Legay pretending to don glasses when they have difficulty reading a question submitted via email.

Luxery and Legay also employ a generative type of dissensus in order to resist assuming authoritative roles. One of the questions they answer in the fifth episode relates to a concern one of their viewers has about feeling the need to pee during sexual activity. Legay begins their response by referencing the duct close to the clitoris that secretes fluid during arousal. They guess at the proper name for the duct and then says, “who the fuck cares?” and continues on with their advice. Before they do, however, Luxery interrupts and emphatically offers the correct name for the duct. Thus, Luxery and Legay's coupling ensures the accuracy of their information, while allowing for the other to temper the collective authority and power by scoffing at formality. Later on, Luxery reminds the viewer that although they are “very good looking, [they]'re not professionals.” This is in relation to a question where the inquirer is expressing a lack of interest in sexual activity. Legay and Luxery agree that one option would be for the individual to seek counselling in order to explore whether their current situation has any connection to past trauma. Another question discussed toward the end of the episode was asked by a woman who identified herself as a fat and queer goth whose friends are telling her to change her appearance and demeanour in order to find an intimate partner. Luxery and Legay begin

responding in a very similar way, telling her that she sounds like a wonderfully fierce person and suggesting that she should first find new friends. They then emphasize that there will be someone who will find her unique personality attractive and desirable. Legay says that she will find someone who will want to “fuck” her *because* the inquirer is the scary person her friends consider her to be. Luxery cuts into Legay's response and says that the inquirer might instead find someone who is romantic and wants to *make love* to her. In this back and forth both Luxery and Legay become increasingly animated and focused on what the other is saying. There is no comfortable compromise, nor is the disagreement smoothed over. Instead, their dissensus is allowed to be part of their package of advice to their viewers.

Repurposing Aesthetic in Stylish Politics

The second need of the young queer commons as addressed through the disidentificatory performances in *Heavy Petting* is for a stylish politic that is grounded in a subversive aesthetic. I have previously mentioned how both Jessica Luxery and Majestic Legay have repurposed certain imagery on their own tumblr sites. This disidentificatory practice also factors heavily into the visual landscape of their newest video project. The ways in which they utilize certain visual stereotypes is directly connected to Muñoz's discussion of desire and identity formation in his text, *Disidentifications*. He states that the repurposing of mainstream identifications is one of the most meaningful tools available to the minoritarian cultural worker because it allows the artist to drawn on and then alter the impact of the power of the original for subversive purposes. I employ the term *minoritarian* in an effort to disrupt the language of “sexual minority” because this slight alteration accomplishes two things. Firstly, it describes the producer who lives outside of the *perceived* majority: homophobic cultures such as ours

have a vested interest in maintaining the perception, whether true or not, that heterosexuality is statistically overwhelmingly more prevalent than any deviation from it. Secondly, it shifts the emphasis away from the subject as belonging to a perceived statistical population and toward their *belonging* to a culture that is formed and indeed thrives outside of the perceived heterosexual majority. This creative practice is similar to the process of reclaiming language, such as lesbians using “dyke” as a self-identifier. The sets of the *Heavy Petting* videos are rife with repurposed imagery. In episode five, the wall behind Luxery and Legay is almost entirely covered with pictures of cats. Specifically, there are three frames that are edged with colourful lace. Cats are undoubtedly one of the most well-known symbols associated with lesbians, in part because a love for cats can be jokingly compared to a desire to be sexually intimate with people who have genitalia that is colloquially referred to as “pussy” (a crude word referring to either a vulva or a feline.) A recently published guidebook of sorts, *Queer* (Cage, Richards, & Wilmot, 2002), offers a broad account of all things pertaining to the persecution, resistance, and cultures of LGBTQQ communities. In a chapter on celebrity icons, the authors joke that appreciating Canadian musician k.d. lang is one of the tell-tale signs that someone is a lesbian, “along with owning a cat, wearing your collars upturned, and playing golf” (p. 215). By stylishly making reference to it, Luxery and Legay effectively repurpose and *camp* this tired stereotype and in so doing, build their aesthetic landscape out of the rubble of worn-out cliché.

Camp, as a performative tool, has an established history of being utilized within queer communities to mimic dominant culture and, through parroting, open new social possibilities. In their anthology titled *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (1999), editor Fabio Cleto has gathered together an array of pieces that speak to the historic and present uses of this tool. In his introduction, he makes valuable note of

the complicated task of attempting to define (or confine) such a fluid and subversive practice. Of particular use in this context of exploring the repurposed aesthetic in *Heavy Petting* is Cleto's account of the debate around the use of the term camp: "The objectification of camp into a *style*, in fact, has been pointed out as a major strategy of domestication that bourgeois epistemology might have posited, a strategy effacing the gay subjectivity and thus making camp available to bourgeois consumption in the 1960s" (p. 4). In light of this, Luxery and Legay's use of camp in repurposing and ultimately disidentifying with certain stereotypes assumes a greater political importance. Not only are they modelling to their viewers how to integrate conflicting desires of potentially poisonous symbols into one's stylized presentation but they are also demonstrating how to do so in a way that reclaims subversive practices, such as camping. They embody the assertion that camp makes: "good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed a good taste of bad taste" (Sontag, 1964). Luxery and Legay's layered and meaningful aesthetic practice further marks *Heavy Petting* as a piece of postmodern performance (the elements of which I described in my third chapter) in that the artist-educators' style and politics are interdependent.

"We Are Family": Models of Acceptance and Intimacy

The world's a mess, but for awhile
 We lick and suck and feel fine
 I find it hard, that's nice to find
 Forget the closet, nevermind

(from "Smells Like Queer Spirit", Pansy Division, 1995)

As was made clear in previous discussions of the nature of the young queer commons, online platforms, such as tumblr, enable users to create communities. These commons resemble familial networks in many ways: users share intimate details of their

personal lives, they look to each other for support and assurance, and they publish milestones, such as marriage. The final part of my analysis of the fifth episode from *Heavy Petting* is couched in the need of the young queer commons for role models and educators who help create an intimate *queerworld*. This is a term used by Muñoz to describe a minoritarian counter commons in which members allow for the expression and hopefully the realization of utopian imperatives. As aforementioned, this commons thrives on generative dissensus and complexity: it is not comprised of families (biological or created) that are monolithic in nature or that expel their kin for acting against expectations. In *Heavy Petting*, Luxery and Legay perform this type of social structure by modelling acceptance of different sexualities and desires and openly displaying intimacy.

The overwhelming majority of the questions submitted to *Heavy Petting* end with the phrase, “is this normal?” This suggests that most of the inquirers and, by inference, viewers of the series are looking for reassurance that their desires or experiences are not problematic or anomalous. In episode five, Luxery and Legay use the term “normal” only a few times in their responses, preferring instead to focus on diffusing the weight of the question by directly addressing the inquirer in a friendly and joking way. They resist offering acceptance by patronizing the person who asked the question by placating them with a simple assurance of normalcy, which is in itself problematic, as it reifies the dichotomy between 'normal' and 'strange.' As I discussed in my second chapter, the troubling of normalcy, and the general practice of unsettling dichotomies, is characteristic of the work of queer theorists. The acceptance Luxery and Legay model is much more honest than that: it is a response grounded in unwavering love, in which the person is addressed first and foremost as a valuable individual, who happens to have a serious question. This is a utopian response, one that presumably most of the viewers of *Heavy Petting* will never receive from the families who raised them. Translating this intimate

practice of acceptance into a theoretically grounded world-view moves us closer to what Norm Denzin calls for: a politic of hope, one that “rests on standpoint and decolonizing epistemologies... [and] establishes links between paradigms, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity” (2009, p. 16)

One of the questions addressed in episode five, aforementioned in this chapter, was submitted by someone who identifies as a fat and queer goth. She says that her friends are trying to convince her to alter her appearance in order to find an intimate partner. Luxery and Legay respond in unison, saying that her friends are “rude!” (see figure 4.2). This response hinges on the assertion that the main problem in the inquirer's life is her friend group. The weight of the question is diffused by Luxery and Legay first trying to boost the woman's confidence. The artist-educators stand in as more accepting and loving friends, thereby offering a taste of what a utopian familial could offer. Viewers who do not personally submit questions can live vicariously through the inquirers and participate in this imagined queerworld, especially if they would have asked about similar topics.



Figure 4.2. A screenshot from the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting*. Here we see Legay and Luxery saying, in unison, that one of the inquirer's friends, who are shaming her for her unique personality, are “rude!”

I have previously discussed a variety of ways through which Luxery and Legay

reveal intimate parts of themselves and their relationship with their online queer youth community. I turn now to examining how they establish a similar sense of intimacy in this episode of *Heavy Petting*. The first type of connection that is made visible within the frame of the video is the one between the artist-educators. At the very beginning of the episode, Luxery introduces herself and Legay, calling them her “trophy wife” (see figure 4.3). This loving joke communicates intimacy but would not be as effective if the introduction was delivered in reverse (i.e. If Legay called Luxery their “trophy wife”) because Luxery performs a very feminine gender in relation to Legay. We see this difference also in their body language: Legay's standard position in all of the *Heavy Petting* episodes is sitting with their arm around their partner. Furthermore, the value of this humorous introduction depends on its disidentificatory nature: Luxery is camping the term to the end of troubling the notion that marriage somehow equates to ownership. However, this disidentification (rather than counteridentification) is a result of the fact that there is a sliver of truth to Luxery's use of the phrase. It is obvious that she does admire and 'prize' her partner. We can see this most clearly in the way that she looks at Legay during the rest of the episode (see figure 4.4). When they are not engaging in dissensus, the one will look to and focus on what the other is saying.



Figure 4.3. A screenshot from the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting*. Luxery introduces Legay as her “trophy wife.”



Figure 4.4. A screenshot from the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting*. Here we see Luxery looking at Legay, focusing on them and what they are saying to the viewers.

The intimacy between Luxery and Legay is also extended to their viewers. As has been demonstrated through previous examples, the inquirers are responded to primarily as individuals, who happen to have troubling questions (as opposed to 'freaks' who are dysfunctional.) Luxery and Legay conclude this episode by inviting people to submit their questions and then by blowing kisses to their viewers (see figure 4.5). The performance of a utopian family is strengthened through extensions of love and heartfelt care. We can also appreciate the labour that is put into making *Heavy Petting* as representative of the affection that the artist-educators have for their viewers and community. The videos are thoroughly edited, linked to supplementary resources, and presumably well planned for in advance (e.g. Choosing the questions to answer, considering responses, building or selecting a set and costumes.) Structural choices tell us that these videos are made with the added support of Jay, who operates the camera. The credits read: “dazzling cinematography by the devastatingly handsome and conveniently single, Jay.” At one point in the episode, we hear the voice of the cinematographer. We know it is Jay because Luxery and Legay respond to their directive to “move to the next question” at a point when the artist-educators are dissolving into foolery. They also

mention Jay during the video as someone who is attractive and available. This compliment suggests that Luxery and Legay are also intimate with their cinematographer and that the camera support is not simply a task but also a labour of love.



Figure 4.5. A screenshot from the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting*. The artist-educators are seen blowing kisses to their viewers at the conclusion of the episode.

Intimacy permeates all aspects of *Heavy Petting*. Coupled with humour it troubles the artist-educators' authority yet establishes their trustworthiness. It enables them to effectively mount a pastiche of the help show trope, thereby representing the complex nature of power in their videos. Intimacy with visual culture and inside knowledge of stereotypes allows Luxery and Legay to creatively repurpose certain imagery. Their disidentificatory performance also serves to model this practice for the viewers and expands their education to include not only sexual health but also subversive modes of identity formation. The private nature of such a difficult task of assembling contradictory elements connected to one's sexual identity and desires further imbues *Heavy Petting* with a strong sense of intimacy. Their acceptance of their diverse viewers creates a safer space within the videos so that these innermost concerns and queries can be explored. Indeed, all of the major elements I have found in analyzing episode five contribute to the utopian nature of the series as a whole. As explained in the mission statement of the

project featured on the website, “it is about seeing how far pleasure can take us.” In the queerworld of *Heavy Petting*, the intimate possibilities seem endless.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

As much as I adore theory, I also recognize that its usefulness is limited. I believe it is the task of the engaged academic to wrangle theory, make sense of it, and discover how it can be applied in 'for real land.' Such spaces are, for whatever reason, separate from formalized learning. They are home to the young queers who are central to this thesis and are the core audience of *Heavy Petting*, the video work by Majestic Legay and Jessica Luxery. In my second chapter, I discussed my use of the term *commons*, as being congruent with the work of Antonio Negri and grounded in a Foucauldian reality of biopolitical life. I explained that the young queer commons where *Heavy Petting* was created and is consumed relies heavily on visual landscapes constructed out of repurposed artefacts. In order to successfully navigate this commons, the subject must have a trained eye and be able to identify intertextual references linked to various channels of pop culture. These referential loops exist mainly outside of academia. This recognition requires me to focus this discussion chapter on making sense of my findings in light of the real needs of the young queer commons. In this discussion, I will return to the three research questions I outlined in my introductory chapter (restated here as a helpful reminder to the reader):

1. What specifically marks a *disidentificatory* performance?
2. What are the roles of the aesthetic in a performative queer politic?
3. What is the potential value of using disidentificatory performance as a tool for community building among young queers?

IMPLICATIONS: RE/TURNING TO 'FOR REAL LAND'

Naming Disidentificatory Performance

I began this thesis with the desire to cultivate my eye for what Jose Esteban Munoz terms *disidentification*, and more specifically, *disidentificatory performance*. In my second chapter I discussed the three criteria for this type of performance, as found in Munoz's text *Disidentifications* (1999): (1) the complexity of power; (2) desire and identification; and (3) the creation of *queerworlds*. Building this 'inventory' moved me closer to being able to answer my first research question and build a lens through which to recognize disidentificatory performance. It was beyond the boundaries of this thesis to conduct a physical application of this type of performance via a creation of my own. In lieu of mounting my own production, I learned from Majestic Legay and Jessica Luxery, the creators of the video series *Heavy Petting*. One of the reasons for why I performed a critical content analysis of their fifth episode was to transfer this theoretical knowledge gained from interacting with Munoz's work into the realm of practical application. From my analysis, I can confidently say that the fifth episode of their series is indeed an example of disidentificatory performance, in that it satisfies the three criteria named above. Firstly, a complex understanding of power is evidenced in the ways that Legay and Luxery navigate their positions of authority as characters in their queer talk show. As I discussed in detail in my previous chapter, the comedic characters they embody model to their viewers how to communicate respectfully and in a way that allows for generative dissensus. Secondly, desire and identification are the building blocks of the show, in that the content of their answers to viewers' questions are concerned with sexual health. Furthermore, the visual landscape of the video frame is full of signifiers of queer sexuality, such as the ball gag hanging to the left of Legay that I discussed in my analysis. Luxery and Legay model how to *repurpose* such visuals, including aesthetics that are

laden with negative meaning or that are directly tied to toxic stereotypes. They also model acceptance and intimacy by virtue of their unwavering support, *as a couple*, of their viewers who ask intimate questions about sexuality. Finally, their reliance on each other and on their viewers is what allows them to create their own *queerworld*. Identifying *Heavy Petting* as a contemporary example of disidentificatory performance within the young queer commons has been an exciting discovery.

The Roles of the Aesthetic in a Performative Queer Politic

Viewing *Heavy Petting* as an example of disidentificatory performance allowed me to appreciate the high aesthetic of the video series in relation to a body of work by other critically aware artists. For example, I am reminded of Leslie Hall, a wonderfully outrageous performance artist who blends her Iowan roots (think meat-and-potatoes and pig farms) into her over-the-top music videos. One of her songs that has an accompanying video is called “Tight Pants / Body Rolls” (see figures 5.1 and 5.2), which tells the story of Leslie Hall's run in with a “troll boy” who promises to bestow upon her a pair of tight pants. The song concludes with Leslie realizing that she was already wearing tight pants but she “just did not activate them.” At face value, this is a ridiculous song set to synthesized beats and an electronically-generated melody. However, a more detailed reading reveals a technically sound song about a woman who struggles with her body image until she realizes that her self-worth is not bound to anyone else's perception of her.



Figure 5.1. A screenshot from Leslie Hall's (centre) music video for her song "Tight Pants / Body Rolls."



Figure 5.2. An image of Leslie Hall from the music video for her song "Tight Pants / Body Rolls."

Similarly, one could dismiss *Heavy Petting* as just another random cultural artefact made by two young people who have an obsession with pink lace and bow ties. The visual landscapes of *Heavy Petting* and Leslie Hall's music video are incredibly rich, textured, and full of repurposed cultural artefacts. Knowing that the creators of both videos are driven by complex political aims (sexual health education and body acceptance, respectively) suggests that the aesthetic has a particularly powerful role to play in a performative queer politic, which was the nature of one of my research questions. As evidenced in my analysis of the fifth episode of *Heavy Petting*, the visual landscape of the video factors heavily in the ways that the creators make meaning within

the boundaries of the screen. In my analysis I discovered that Luxery and Legay's critical pastiche of the help show structure models for the viewer how to challenge and make new sense out of old tropes. This practice is especially useful in revising the help show because it is a staple of Western mass media that has been used to devalue and pathologize queerness. For example, think of the promiscuous lesbian who is interviewed after she 'ruined' her perfectly normal heterosexual life or the 'damaged' transsexual who 'tricked' their partner into bed. As evidenced in my analysis, the aesthetic is a powerful tool at the disposal of queer cultural workers who wish to further a performative queer politic. Some specific ways that this tool may be used are demonstrated and accounted for in my previous chapter.

The Potential for Community Building

The importance of the aesthetic in a performative queer politic is closely linked to the revolutionary power of pleasure. In *Heavy Petting*, Luxery and Legay demonstrate that the serious work of surviving need not be devoid of pleasure. In fact, they prove to their viewers that pleasure (sexual or otherwise) can in itself be an act of survival. They show that taking control over and pride in our desires, our bodies, and our identities is part of the process of accessing our power as young queers. In my second chapter, I outlined four elements that comprise a performative queer theory, one of which was framed as the slippage between success and failure. I am interested in the power that can be found in (re)framing sex as a practice that can help us, in the words of Samuel Beckett, learn how to fail better. I am signalling a type of queer and crip²⁵ failure, one that defies the pressures from a capitalist state to produce successful citizens within nuclear family structures. I am also tipping my hat to an understanding of sexual intimacy as an

²⁵ For more on the term “crip”, refer back to chapter two and my discussion of crip theory.

opportunity for queer and crip subjects to explore non-normative bodies. Few of us have the privilege of seeing our bodies re-presented in all forms of media, including instructive materials and pornography. Exploring one's body with a sexual partner(s) in a consensual environment may be a rare opportunity to discover creative ways of achieving pleasure. If we are to take up Luxery and Legay's call issued in *Heavy Petting* and view pleasure as a practice of survival, sex can become a revolutionary act, rather than as primarily a productive act (in the sense of both biological reproduction and non-deviant pleasure seeking).

The intensity of the political nature of their project is made accessible to audiences beyond the engaged 'radical' through the use of the aesthetic and other tools, such as humour. It is not an aesthetically-informed teaching tool, nor is it a performance that casually offers facts about STIs and practicing consent. In other words, its layered visual landscape allows *Heavy Petting* to exist simultaneously as a performance and as a project for sexual health education. As I discussed in detail in my previous chapter, Luxery and Legay model how humour can be used both as a tool for queering toxic tropes (aesthetic) and for building relationships with each other and their followers (educational). In their answers to their viewers' questions, they manage to strike a balance between respecting the weight of the inquiries and valuing the healing power of laughter. In this way, they actually move us *beyond* the act of survival and into the practice of joy. This is key to the question of community building: we need to build our commons but we should also *want* to do this work. In particular, Luxery and Legay have managed to harness the power of *disidentificatory performance* in building community. It is this creative medium in particular that allows for creative survival.

CHAPTER SIX
“My Family”: Conclusion

The title for this chapter is lifted from the song of the same name by the alternative pop group, MEN. JD Samson, their front man, has been active in the queer pop music scene since their time with the now-defunct feminist art band, Le Tigre. A substantial contributing factor to MEN's success has undoubtedly been JD's positive reputation as a talented musician and an eccentric performance artist. The song “My Family” is a track on MEN's first and only album to date, *Talk About Body* (see figure 6.1). The lyrics tell of a family that is made up of many unique characters, including Brownie the gardener, Leidy the painter, and Jo the goddess. The listener is addressed directly in the chorus: “welcome brothers / welcome to the fold.” Thus, we are invited to a glorious three and a half minutes of visiting time with this queer family and are told of each member's contributions to the communal operations of the home. The line that is repeated at the end states “we give us all we need.” Every time I listen to this song, I am transported to a utopian moment, one in which I am surrounded by members of a creative queer commons. I register a similar feeling while watching *Heavy Petting*. Discovering this video series and being able to conclude that it is a contemporary example not only of disidentificatory performance but also a piece of critical sexual health education has been very exciting.



Figure 6.1. Image of the cover art for MEN's latest album, *Talk About Body*.

As a community educator and a queer youth, I have vested interest in projects such as *Heavy Petting* and songs such as “My Family.” I am part of the intended audience for Luxery and Legay's video series and MEN's music. I understand the significance of peer-to-peer learning for queer youth and its utopian potential from many positions, including as a young scholar. It is from my academic perspective that I see the power of grounding a creative method for sexual health education in a well-built theoretical framework. I have made the argument in this thesis for a *performative* queer theory as being an ideal structure within which to evaluate aesthetics alongside tasks of political urgency. What has emerged for me is a newfound appreciation for the delicate art of dancing between disciplines (queer theory, performance studies, political analysis) and the satisfaction that comes from learning the steps.

A FINAL NOTE ON REFLEXIVITY

I wish to briefly return to the importance of reflexivity that I addressed in my introductory chapter. At the beginning of the writing process, I made a promise to myself and the communities to which I belong that I would regularly make time to pause, reflect, and consider how my personal location affected my direction and conclusions. As a result, I have found this thesis rewarding as both an student and an individual. I am thankful for the space that I have been afforded to think in-depth about concepts and questions that are important in the academic field I work within. Moreover, these themes have implications in my personal life as a young queer. When I say that I have been *afforded* with time and space, I am acknowledging that I am immensely privileged to be able to complete a bachelor's degree. I stand before the final precipice of what has been a five-year journey and I am aware of all the financial and emotional resources that allowed me to walk this path. This personal reflection is an integral part of the conclusion to this thesis for the simple reason this has been a very personal project undertaken within the systems that have enabled me to be successful.

POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE WORK

The themes I have discussed within this thesis could provide endless material for future work. Specifically, there are two areas that I would be very interested to return to and explore further. Firstly, I am interested in how the significance of *Heavy Petting* is shaped by the fact that it is a recording. I wonder how the viewer's reception would be influenced if the show were to be performed live. I recognize that the recorded nature of *Heavy Petting* has practical implications: for queer youth who do not have access to live embodiments of desire outside of heteronormativity, online video can meet their need for familial models. This medium also can allow the viewer to possibly feel less embarrassed

in light of the subject matter. Does the video series rely on the medium of video in order to put the viewer at ease? The content of the questions discussed by Majestic Legay and Jessica Luxery are sensitive, ranging from STIs to body image. Would viewers be more reluctant to submit their inquiries if they knew that they would be addressed in front of a live audience? Legay and Luxery currently manage a very limited and controlled visual landscape: the screen is a set size and the variables are limited, as there are presumably only three people on set during filming (Luxery, Legay, and their videographer.) The repurposing of symbols and aesthetics proved to be a dominant theme in my analysis. How would the creators choose to alter their visual vocabulary if they performed on a stage in front of a live audience? The role of documentation and the question of live versus recorded performance could provide interesting material for future thought.

The second area to which I would be interested to return is how the creators have been changed through their work. I would love to interview Majestic Legay and Jessica Luxery about their experiences building *Heavy Petting*. They are very open about their relationship as a couple both in their answers to their viewers questions and on the website for their project. How has their artistic relationship affected their intimate dynamic? Have they personally benefitted from their work? Throughout the process of writing this thesis, I have considered how Legay and Luxery would react to my conclusions. I did not include this in my writing because it is purely speculative but I would be interested to engage in conversation with them. This is a real possibility not only because they are real living people but also because I have a previous albeit superficial relationship with Majestic from our shared time as students at the University of Victoria (Lekwungen Territory). Beyond the fact that it would make for an interesting paper, I know that I would personally gain from interviewing Legay and Luxery about their work with *Heavy Petting*, since I am also a performance artist.

If I were to interview Luxery and Legay, one of my first questions would invite them to speak to how they developed their unique style as artists. As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, this thesis is located in a cultural environment in which national institutions, social structures, and mass media are aligned against young queers, especially those who do not have access to privileges afforded to those who are white, cis, able-bodied, heterosexual, Canadian citizens, settlers, or in the middle or upper classes. Due to this reality, young queers may have to navigate multiple barriers in order to access artistic expression. Art should be a human right, not a privilege but in the capitalist West it is often considered to be a luxury. I began this project with the desire to contribute to the proverbial toolbox that young queers access in order to create their identities. We discover ourselves in relation to others and what we are shown as being possible, which is why giving young people access to models of queerness is a critical question of access. I am hopeful that a continued engagement with disidentificatory performance will allow us to build and strengthen the self-sufficient commons of our [wet] dreams.

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